

Series: John's Letters

Title: Giving for Missions and Ministry

Text: 3 John 5-8

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Verse 5

In verse 5, John transitioned from greeting his readers to encouraging them in regard to their support of gospel ministry. He said, "Dear friend, you are acting faithfully in whatever you do for the brothers and sisters, especially when they are strangers" (3 John 5). The Greek word translated "faithfully" was used of one who acted in a trustworthy or dependable manner.¹ It portrayed one who was faithful to fulfill a given duty.² John's use of the term was intended to encourage his readers to fulfill their responsibility to financially support traveling ministers and missionaries. Interestingly, the same word translated "faithfully" appeared in his first letter when he said, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The faithfulness of the Lord to believers should motivate them to exhibit faithfulness in generous giving to gospel ministry. If the Lord was diligent to provide forgiveness for our sins, shouldn't we be diligent to contribute financially so that others might hear the message of forgiveness?

To speak of his reader's involvement in giving, John made reference to "whatever you do for the brothers and sisters." The original language of the text implied "an unspecified number of ways or occasions."³ John realized that there were a multitude of ways in which his readers could have shown generosity to ministers and missionaries. In a first-century world in which currency wasn't as standardized as it is nowadays, donations may have been given in various forms and amounts.

Take note of the potential recipients of the financial gifts from John's readers. The apostle made mention of "the brothers and sisters," but he also referenced "strangers." The phrase "brothers and sisters" in modern English translations adds "sisters" to the text. The original Greek simply has the plural form of the famous *adelphós*, a term frequently used in the New Testament of fellow Christians. The title conveyed the family-like love and support experienced within the body of Christ. As used by John in our current verse, the term was intended to remind his readers that traveling ministers were spiritual kin to his readers. He had highlighted such truth in his first letter by saying, "See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God's children—and we are!" (1 John 3:1). He emphasized it now in order to encourage monetary contributions. Considering the bond that believers had in Christ, the church should have been prepared to support their "brothers and sisters" financially.

John also mentioned "strangers." In the original language of the text, emphasis was placed on the word. The apostle's intent was to say the church should "even help strangers." Who were the people he had in mind? Well, our text indicates they were believers, since they are portrayed as being a part of "the brothers and sisters." It seems John had in mind traveling evangelists with whom his readers probably had no prior acquaintance. Maybe he was personally dispatching some preachers from his local church. Perhaps he realized there may have been some reluctance on the part of some believers to support preachers they did not know.

¹ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 314.

² Zodhiates, 1165.

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 602.

Cultural custom in the first-century world required travelers to rely on the generous hospitality of others as they travelled from town to town. John had concern that some preachers might be shunned by local churches. He wanted his readers to gladly support traveling ministers and missionaries, even if they did not know them personally. The New Testament encouraged such hospitality and financial support in other places. Peter told his readers, “Be hospitable to one another without complaining” (1 Peter 4:9). The author of Hebrews said, “Let brotherly love continue. Don’t neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:1-2).

John’s words in 3 John 5 uphold the importance of giving to gospel ministry. Financial support of missionaries and ministers is a matter of faithfulness to Christ and His mission. Local congregations should be strategic in funding work related to the Great Commission. They should work hard to find “brothers and sisters,” even ones who might be “strangers,” to support with gifts and contributions.

Verse 6

Apparently, John’s readers had proven themselves faithful in regard to Christian giving in the past. The apostle had received testimony of their diligence. His intent in writing now was only to encourage continual faithfulness, and to warn about the temptation of withholding from ministers or missionaries who might be deemed “strangers” (3 John 5). In verse 6, he both shared about the good report he had received, while encouraging continued faithfulness, by saying, “They have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God” (3 John 6). The word rendered “testified” was used of one who gave a firsthand, eyewitness account concerning a matter. It seems some had travelled back and forth between John and his readership and had personally told John of the faithfulness to Christian giving on the part of his readers.

Despite their past diligence, John encouraged continued obedience. He encouraged his readers to support traveling missionaries and ministers by saying, “...send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God.” The Greek of the text was used in the ancient world to speak of “furnishing things necessary for someone’s travel.”⁴ Some believe the language employed had become “something of a technical term in the context of missionary work in the early church.”⁵ John wanted his readers to support preachers and evangelists, to give gospel workers all they needed for their travels and their ministry endeavors.

A study of the New Testament reveals that such financial support is a standard expectation of God’s people. When Jesus washed His disciples feet, He made a passing reference to the importance of people receiving His ministers and missionaries well: “Truly I tell you, whoever receives anyone I send receives me, and the one who receives me receives him who sent me” (John 13:20). Paul plainly instructed Titus to support traveling ministers: “Diligently help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their journey, so that they will lack nothing” (Titus 3:13). In addition, Paul gave testimony of how he had received support for his work: “...I have strongly desired for many years to come to you whenever I travel to Spain. For I hope to see you when I pass through and to be assisted by you for my journey there, once I have first enjoyed your company for a while” (Romans 15:23-24).

John qualified the way in which his readers were to give by speaking of “a manner worthy of God.” He wanted the quality of their support to be acceptable and suitable. Considering the Lord’s graciousness and generosity toward His people, stingy and half-hearted gifts were

⁴ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 330.

⁵ Akin, 243.

unacceptable. John's readers were to do their best to give generous gifts that might bless both the Lord and those who received their support. The apostle's encouragement was in alignment with what Paul told the Corinthians: "The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

Verse 7

In verse 7, John provided rationale for why his readers should have been extra careful to give a gift that was pleasing to God. He said, "...since they set out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from pagans" (3 John 7). In his appeal, John provided two reasons for faithful giving. First, the traveling preachers of which he spoke served "for the sake of the Name." What "Name" did John have in view? None other than the name of Jesus — "the name that is above every name" (Philippians 2:9), the name at which "every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Philippians 2:10).

Since John's missionary colleagues were serving for the glory of Jesus, there was good reason for him to give an appeal for financial support. May local congregations always remember that the fame of "the Name" of Jesus is at stake in their budgets and offerings. May they live with a conviction that it is their duty to shine the glory of Jesus to a lost world. Jesus Himself said, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

A second reason for faithful giving was the fact that John's ministry counterparts had the practice of "accepting nothing from pagans." The word rendered "pagans" is one that was often translated "Gentiles." It referred to a non-Jew, but it often had connotations that went far beyond ethnic identity. In the Jewish way of thinking, a Gentile was a godless person, a person who didn't worship the one true God. As a result, John's use of the word pointed to non-Christians. It referenced "unbelievers as a whole in contrast to Christians."⁶

John didn't want his traveling evangelist friends to have to succumb to living off of the generosity of unbelievers. If their funding came from those who didn't know Christ, two problems would result. First, non-Christians could have possibly had a platform for criticizing the church. John didn't want missionaries and ministers to be open to accusations of greed. Second, John didn't want the responsibility of the church to fall on the shoulders of those outside of the church. It would have been a great shame for the household of faith to outsource its God-given duty to unbelievers.

When Jesus sent His disciples out to minister, He conveyed a similar concern regarding the financial support of ministers and ministry. In his gospel account, Mark said, "He instructed them to take nothing for the road except a staff—no bread, no traveling bag, no money in their belts" (Mark 6:8). Why did Jesus tell His disciples to not take money with them on their ministry journeys? Our Lord wanted to put the burden of supporting ministry on the people to whom the Twelve ministered. In all generations, the Lord wants His people to demonstrate their value of gospel ministry by supporting that ministry with their finances and resources.

Verse 8

John closed his remarks on missions giving by saying, "Therefore, we ought to support such people so that we can be coworkers with the truth." The word translated "we" appeared in the

⁶ Akin, 244.

emphatic position in the original language of the text.⁷ Interestingly, John included Himself in his admonition by using a first person plural pronoun (“we”). His intent was to show that financial “support” of gospel ministry is a nonnegotiable for all believers. Each Christ follower, even the aged apostle, should play a part in undergirding gospel ministry with his or her resources.

The word translated “ought” was one that spoke of an obligation, of something that was an absolute necessity. It spoke of one being indebted to another.⁸ In implementing the word, John used a present tense verb. The verbiage depicted a continual, ongoing obligation.⁹ The apostle’s language was indeed strong. He left no room for his readers to shirk their responsibility to give to missions and ministry. He upheld financial stewardship and sacrifice for gospel ministry as the moral responsibility of every believer.

Though he made an appeal on the basis of spiritual duty, John also appealed to realities associated with the body of Christ. He told his readers that Christian giving was a way for them to be “coworkers” in gospel ministry. The title “coworkers” is based on a compound Greek word that literally meant “to work with.” Though the members of the church to which he wrote may not have had the opportunity to travel and preach the gospel in various regions, they could financially support those who did.

In the convention of churches to which my local church belongs, there is an agency that supports over four thousand foreign missionaries. Every time our church collects an offering for such missionaries, Scripture teaches that we labor with them in the gospel ministry. Believers of all ages can have confidence that God is greatly pleased in their financial contributions to gospel ministry. When one gives toward the work of ministers and missionaries, one becomes a partner with Christ’s Great Commission.

⁷ Akin, 244-245.

⁸ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 289.

⁹ Akin, 245.