

The Elder to the Elect and the Beloved

A Sermon on 2 and 3 John

Texts: 2 John, 3 John

In Second and Third John, we actually get to read an apostle's mail. The Second Epistle of John was written to a church with which John was intimately familiar, some time in the last decade of the first century. Very likely, this was a congregation located near the city of Ephesus, where John was an elder and the last living apostle. John personifies this church as the "elect lady" and speaks of its members as her children. The Third Epistle of John was written to a man named Gaius. Since Gaius was the most common name in Asia Minor at that time, and since there are several men with that name mentioned in the New Testament, it is impossible to identify this person with any specificity. But in any case, these two short letters tell us a great deal about both the apostolic church and the apostle John. The contents of Second and Third John remind us of the importance of sound doctrine, as well as the role of Christian charity in the lives of God's people.

We now conclude our series on the epistles of John by turning our attention to the two shortest letters in all of the New Testament, 2 and 3 John.¹ These letters contains less than 300 hundred words each, and from their contents, it is clear that John composed each of them on a single sheet of papyrus. Since the ink of that period was made of soot and water thickened with gum (resin made from tree/plant sap), John filled up a page, and then quit so that it could dry before being folded and then sealed with wax.² A number of the same issues John has addressed in his first epistle reappear in these two epistles, although in greatly abridged form. Both are typical of letters from this period—they follow the classic epistolary style—in which John introduces himself through the use of his title—elder—not his name.

I debated about whether or not to even preach on these letters. I concluded that since God saw fit to include them in the canon, it is important that we treat them as Scripture—and they do have several interesting and important points for us as a church. Given the brevity and nature of these personal letters—there are no Old Testament citations or echoes in either of them—I thought it best to treat both of them in one sermon—hence, a first lesson and second lesson, as opposed to our usual practice of an Old Testament and a New Testament lesson. We'll go through each of these letters rather quickly, and then we'll draw some conclusions as we wrap up.

The immediate context in which these letters were written reflects the typical problems associated with traveling missionaries in the apostolic era. If nothing else, the Romans were great civil engineers. They managed to connect much of their empire through a series of well-constructed roads which made travel much easier than it had been previously. Christian missionaries took full advantage of that infrastructure provided them by Rome—a common language and a network of good roads. In fact, Christianity had spread throughout most of the Roman empire by the end of the first century. In the providence of God, Roman roads and the Greek language had much to do with the rapid spread of the gospel.

But traveling missionaries encountered a number of problems, some of which John addresses in these

¹ See the discussions of these epistles in: Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, and Stott, *The Epistles of John*.

² Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 217.

brief epistles. No doubt, travel in the first century had its difficulties—especially for Christians. There were no hotels or restaurants. There were, in many places, privately-owned inns and stables, usually located near cities and crossroads, and scattered a day’s journey apart. But these inns were usually nothing more than brothels. They were often very dirty (unsanitary), and were havens for robbers and thieves. Roman legal records are filled with law-breaking on the part of innkeepers, who were regarded as unsavory characters because of the trouble generated by their establishments.

Christians did not feel safe, nor comfortable staying in such places. When forced to travel, Christians sought out the hospitality of other Christians, who took them in, fed them, and provided them with a safe place to sleep—as well as Christian fellowship. It was common for someone’s home church to issue a letter to a traveler, detailing their faithfulness to Christ, affirming their standing in the church, as well as promising hospitality (in turn) to all who took care of the members of their church.

Given sinful human nature, it was not long before false teachers (like those mentioned by John throughout his first epistle) took advantage of such Christian hospitality to both spread their false teaching as well as pad their wallets. As one commentator puts it, “the false prophet with false credentials was motivated less by creed than by greed, namely the material profit and free board and lodging he hoped to receive.”³ What was a church to do when travelers showed-up, seeking out Christian hospitality, but who did not have proof of their Christian testimony. One of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament—the Didache—warns Christians “Whoever says in the Spirit, ‘give me money,’ or anything else [like that], do not listen to him.” So, this was a real issue in the churches.

Therefore, the Apostle must address both the willingness of Christians to extend hospitality to their brothers and sisters who are traveling, as well as give to Christians an easy test to determine whether or not someone was trustworthy enough to be given such Christian hospitality. John’s test is very simple and should come as no surprise to those who read his first epistle—“What do these traveling Christians profess about Christ?” Do they believe that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. Or do they deny our Lord’s true humanity, and therefore his incarnation (which John calls the spirit of antichrist)?

So, with that, we turn to Second John, and the apostle’s letter to the elect lady and her children.

SSecond John opens with a three verse introduction. “*The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever: Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son, in truth and love.*” There is a debate about whether or not John’s reference to the “elect lady” is a reference to a particular lady (unnamed), or is a personification of a congregation familiar to the Apostle. One of the church fathers (Clement) identified this lady as “Electa.” But this is a real stretch, and identifying her (if John is actually referring to a person) is pure speculation.

Most commentators take John to be referring to a local church over which the Apostle exercised some sort of apostolic authority—which would explain John’s use of the title “elder” as well as the thrice repeated reference to the woman’s children (v. 1, 4, 13). Furthermore, John’s language is not appropriate if this were a real woman to whom John is sending a personal letter. His mention of love for her and her children along with his exhortation in verse 5 for her to love others, is much more appropriate (and makes much more sense) if John’s referring to a congregation as the elect lady, and its members as her

³ Stott, John’s Epistles, 202.

children. In addition, John's exhortation in verses 7-11 about dealing with false teachers who travel about looking for people to scam, makes much more sense if addressed to a particular congregation and its members, not to a woman and her family. And unlike 3 John, there are no references to specific individuals (as when John writes to Gaius), making it much more likely that this letter is addressed to a familiar congregation, not a particular family headed by a widow with a number of children.

It is interesting to note that in Ephesians 5:22-23 (a letter which Paul writes about 62 A.D., to the same church where John is now serving as an elder about thirty years later), Paul speaks of the church in Ephesus using bride imagery (*"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior"*). Throughout the Old Testament there are a number of references to Israel as "the daughter of Zion" (i.e., Isaiah 52:2), the bride of YHWH (Isaiah 62:4-5), and so on. So, there is certainly precedent for John to speak of a congregation in these terms ("elect lady"). In fact, in the closing verse of this epistle (v. 13), John speaks in similar terms of another congregation—*"The children of your elect sister greet you."* Therefore, the case is quite strong that John sends this letter to a congregation with which he is very familiar, and which he greets quite warmly because of a common bond—*because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever* (verse 2).

The tie that binds the elder to this congregation is the truth—a common set of doctrines revealed by Christ (who is God in the flesh) and proclaimed by all of the apostles. This body of truth (apostolic doctrine regarding Jesus' person and work) establishes a bond between believers who believe the same thing. This means that the truth (or, to put it another way, faith in Christ as the word made flesh) is the basis for that love which Christians are to have for each other, and which inevitably manifests itself in concrete action as John will briefly state in the subsequent verses. There is nothing new here, as John simply restates much of what he said in his first epistle. But the application John makes is certainly new. How does the command to love one another relate to Christian charity? We can put John's point rather crudely, "must Christians also love heretics and false teachers?" "Are we required to show charity and mercy to those who profess to be Christians, and yet reject the truth?" John's answer. No!

While we may be tempted to overlook verse 3, it contains the typical apostolic greeting. *"Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love."* John extends to his beloved Christians a greeting reminding us of God's grace and mercy (the forgiveness of sins extended toward sinners in the cross of Christ) as well as God's peace, which is the declaration that God's anger toward us has been removed by Christ, so that we live in state in which the hostility between God and sinners has been removed. We are at peace with God, the war is over. But in light of the presence of the docetic heresy in the area (which held that Jesus was fully God, but only appeared in human form), John reaffirms that Jesus is God's son (the word made flesh) and who came in truth (John saw Jesus, heard Jesus, and touched Jesus) and in love (Jesus' new commandment).

In verses 4-11, we come to heart of John's message. John begins with thanksgiving because of God's work in the midst of this congregation. Thus in verse 4, we read, *"I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father."* While not everyone was walking in the truth—hence, the reason for this letter—John is still thankful that many were walking in the truth, as God had commanded them. I take it that this is John's way of saying that Christians are to believe those things God has revealed about Christ and his saving work in God's word. We are commanded to walk in the truth, which means that we believe must those things which God has revealed to us in the gospel. When we believe the truth which God reveals, we are "obedient" to the truth.

But, just as he did in the first epistle, John ties truth and love together. Believing the right things must lead to the proper behavior. Doctrine precedes ethics, as the indicative precedes the imperative. And so, John tells his audience in verse 5, *“And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another.”* Jesus gave this commandment as recorded in John 13:34, and John restated it several times in his first epistle. Nothing new here—Christians are to love one another as Christ commanded, something which was common knowledge (given the way John speaks of this command here and elsewhere). In fact, in verse 6, John reminds this church as to what such love actually entails—*“And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.”* The way we love one another is by obeying God’s commandments found in the second table of the law, (our duties toward our neighbor).

The reason why John must restate this as he does is that there are those in the church who profess to be Christ’s, but who are really doing the work of antichrist. As John writes in verse 7, *“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.”* While a true faith manifests itself in love, there are many who may (at first glance), seem to be concerned with loving their neighbors, and who act like Christians, but are, in actuality, deceivers. Those who have been taken in by this docetic and proto-Gnostic heresy, deny that Jesus is God come in the flesh because they believe that matter is evil. Jesus could not, therefore, be truly human. Such people have already gone out into the world. Antichrist (heresy) was a direct threat to the apostolic church! Such people deceive, John says, which means they seek to convert others to their heretical views. And they do it with a smile and, apparently, in love.

And so in verses eight-eleven, John warns the congregation. *“Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.”* So, the point is very direct, and very simply stated. Don’t extend any Christian charity to a heretic! Don’t even allow such people into your homes. They may claim to be Christ’s, but because they do not believe the truth, God does not abide in them. In fact, Christians are not even to greet them (the apostolic greeting, was a kiss on the cheek). While struggling sinners are to be embraced with open arms (according to Jesus there will indeed be tax collectors and prostitutes in heaven), heretics are to be turned away, period. Because they deny that Jesus was truly human, these people have neither the Father nor the Son. Believers must take no part in their evil activities. We are to have nothing to do with them.

Having come to the end of his sheet of papyrus, John quickly wraps up in verses 12-13. *“Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete. The children of your elect sister greet you.”* This short letter will have to do. John will come to this congregation in person and explain things in more detail. But his message to the elect lady and her children is perfectly clear. The Christian faith is founded on the truth of God’s revelation in Christ. While Christians must love one another, if someone denies the truth and embraces heresy, Christians are to have nothing to do with them. Don’t even let them in your home, and do nothing to show any kind of Christian bond with them. The Father and the Son do not abide in them.

We now turn to Third John, in which the Apostle once again addresses the problem of Christian truth and love, and the relationship of both to Christian hospitality.

As I mentioned earlier, we know from the Didache that Christian hospitality was a real issue in the early church. The Didache has instructions covering matters such as how long someone is to extend hospitality (one day, normally; two in cases of necessity; if the person asks to stay three days, he's to be considered a false prophet!). A guest may ask for a day's food, but not for money. If the guest wishes to stay any longer than two days, they must work and earn their keep.⁴ Throughout the New Testament, the apostles exhort us to be willing to extend charity to all our brothers and sisters in Christ in need, but the apostles also universally condemn free-loading and laziness.

John opens this letter as he did the previous one, mentioning his title (elder) but not his name. This letter was sent to a man named Gaius. While we do not know who, exactly, this man is, John knows the man quite well. "*The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.*" As John begins to write, his deep and abiding affection for his friend Gaius becomes clear with the repeated references of love that the apostle has for his friend, as we see beginning in verse 2. "*Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.*" Sadly, John's word of affection and his best wishes to his friend Gaius, have been seized upon by Word-Faith teachers, who contend that this is a general principle for all who have enough faith—is its God's will for all of us to be in good health and to live a life in which we create our own prosperity by speaking it forth in faith. Utter nonsense. John is doing nothing more than wishing his friend Gaius well.

As he did in the previous letter, John quickly focuses upon the importance of the truth. "*For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth.*" John seems genuinely thrilled to learn that his friend has stood fast in the truth revealed to John by Jesus himself. Gaius has not only stood for truth, but when John speaks of "*walking in the truth,*" the Apostle is affirming that Gaius is also living in a way that is consistent with the truth. This causes John to rejoice. As the Apostle goes on to say in verse 4, "*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*" Nothing gives the elderly apostle more joy than the knowledge that his spiritual children are holding firm to the truth. Furthermore, John rejoices because Gaius is setting an example for Christians everywhere to follow. "*Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church.*" Gaius is, apparently, well known for opening his house to his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, who were strangers when they first arrived, but not strangers for long. Gaius took these people in and cared for them, something John sees as "*walking in the truth.*" Gaius has, apparently, a great reputation in the church.

In the last half of verse 6, John advises Gaius to continue the practice—"You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God." Such travelers are Gaius' brothers and sisters in Christ. Gaius' care of them is consistent with Jesus teaching in Matthew 25, that as we treat the least of our brethren, we do unto Jesus. Travelers may be strangers to Gaius, but they are not strangers to God, which is John's point in verse 7. "*For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.*" The language of "going out" seems to imply some sort of commissioning, as would be the case with missionaries.⁵ This may indicate that Gaius took special interest in providing a place for traveling missionaries. Because people like Gaius took care of these people when they traveled, the missionaries were not forced to accept anything from the Gentiles (or, better, "the pagans"). Because Christians supported these people through their generous hospitality, these missionaries (or traveling

⁴ Cited in Stott, The Epistles of John, 220-221.

⁵ Stott, The Epistles of John, 226.

evangelists) were able to go about their work without having to ask for money. That removes one of the most offense aspects of such work—asking for money or charity to support oneself.

Elsewhere, Paul warns us about people who “*like so many, [are] peddlers of God's word.*” The New Testament teaches that churches are to support those whom they call to minister to them, or who they send out to do mission work. Christians are also warned about religious entrepreneurs, who are self-appointed, self-sent, and who preach the gospel for personal gain. John’s point is that since Gaius is willing to show hospitality to Christians doing the Lord’s work (presumably those called and sent by the churches with the credentials to prove it), the travelers don’t need to ask pagans for money. As John says in verse 8, “*Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.*” Gaius was widely-known for doing just that, and his hospitality toward God’s people, enabled them to do their work, and not worry about food and lodging. And this causes John to rejoice.

But for every Gaius in the church, there is also a Diotrophes. In verses 9-11, John turns to the difficult problems created by this one man who simply will not listen nor yield to authority. Says John, “*I have written something to the church, but Diotrophes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.*” Not only is Diotrophes unwilling to listen to John and submit to apostolic authority, but Diotrophes is a gossip who resents travelers, missionaries, and evangelists, and will not take them in. In fact, Diotrophes even goes so far as contend that such people be excommunicated. This man has no use for anyone not from his own congregation. Sadly, he sounds like many cranky Reformed folk I know. John tells Gaius that when the Apostle comes to visit Gaius’ church, he will speak to Diotrophes face to face. John’s counsel to Gaius is simple. “*Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.*” Gaius should continue doing what he is doing, and ignore Diotrophes altogether, instead leaving him to John, who will deal with him when he arrives.

Coming to the end of his sheet of parchment, John make several final comments (vv. 12-15). “*Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself.*” There is another faithful man in this church, and John commends him to Gaius. John goes on to say, “*We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.*” Again, John’s gospel is public. It is grounded in the truth of what Jesus did in history, not in neo-Gnostic secrets. In closing, he tells his friend Gaius, “*I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them.*” Truly amazing to read an apostle’s mail. No wonder these letters are in the canon.

What can we take with us from these two letters?

The first thing which these letters tell us is that John is unashamedly committed to the truth of his message. Indeed, his gospel is his testimony as to what he knows and experienced. Christianity does not see itself as one religion among many, but as the truth, the only true religion. John saw Jesus. John heard Jesus. John touched Jesus. John was there with Mary when Jesus died on the cross (John 19:25-26). He was there when Jesus rose again from the dead (John 20). For John, because Christianity is true, Christians must not only conduct themselves in accordance with God’s law (John’s language of “walking”), but Christians must believe and contend for the truth.

The second thing we should take with us from these epistles is John’s exhortation that Christians are to have nothing to do with false teachers. Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, but not with the

Sanhedrin. We are to have nothing to do with anyone who denies our Lord's incarnation, while claiming to be a Christian. John is not telling us to be mean to Jehovah's Witnesses or to slam the door on Mormon missionaries. This is not about being unwilling to engage in dialogue with unbelievers, or that we should be unwilling to debate with those who don't know the truth. The Apostle is telling us not to have any fellowship with anyone who claims to be a Christian, but who denies (self-consciously) our Lord's incarnation, because they have willingly and intentionally embraced false doctrine. This is a reference to Christian heretics and deceivers—i.e., Word of Faith teachers, or Christians who attack the historicity and veracity of the gospel and the word of God, with the goal of undermining people's faith.

Finally, as a general principle, John is encouraging Christian charity, and we ought to be very concerned about any of our brothers and sisters in need—so concerned we actually help them! But more specifically, in this letter John is telling us that we are to support (as a church) all those whom we call to serve, or those whom we send out (like Gaius was doing), so that they don't have to ask pagans for money when they do the Lord's work. The equally important corollary to this principle is that Christians ought to be very suspicious of anyone who "calls" and "sends" themselves, i.e., religious entrepreneurs, people who seek to make a living off the gospel, and not because the church calls them and supports them. This applies in our context to the modern televangelist, or many parachurch "ministries" which have no ties to a church, and which are accountable to no one. While Christians are obligated to support the church of which they are members, they have no obligation to support those who call and send themselves. If they choose to support such people, they do so at their own risk. *Caveat emptor!*

At the end of the day, the gospel is everything for John. The gospel is truth, it is the basis for Christian love and charity. We must believe it and defend it (because it is true). For John, it all comes down to this from chapter 4 of his first epistle. *"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."*