

THE EPISTLES OF 1, 2, & 3 JOHN
RWANDAN PASTOR'S CONFERENCE
SESSION VII
3 JOHN

We now open the final segment of our course, the book of 3 John. Third John is not only the shortest book in the New Testament; it is the shortest book in the entire Bible. In the original Greek language, there are only 219 words. It is often described as a “*twin*” epistle to its sister letter, 2 John. As we dig into this final epistle from the Apostle John we are going to examine five key areas: First we will look briefly at the background of the letter, including its similarities and differences to 2 John. Secondly, as we open the text itself we will begin with the introduction and the commendation of Gaius. Next we will move to the condemnation of Diotrephes. The fourth section will deal with the introduction and praise of Demetrius. The fifth and final segment will be a very brief review of John’s farewell.

BACKGROUND AND KEY THEMES OF 3 JOHN

As mentioned above, 3 John is the shortest book of the entire Bible, containing only 219 words in the Greek language. Daniel Akin points out some of the key *similarities* of this book to 2 John:¹

1. The author of both books describe himself as “*the elder*”. (2 John 1; 3 John 1)
2. The recipients are those whom he “*loves in the truth*”. (2 John 4; 3 John 3)
3. The recipients are the occasion of “*great rejoicing*” (2 John 4; 3 John 3)
4. The recipients “*walk in the truth*”. (2 John 4; 3 John 3)
5. The elder has received good reports about both. (2 John 4; 3 John 3, 5)
6. Both letters contain a warning. (2 John 8; 3 John 9)
7. The elder desires to see both face to face. (2 John 12; 3 John 14)
8. Reports the greetings of others to the recipients. (2 John 13; 3 John 14)

Akin also lists a number of *differences* to 2 John. A few of the key ones are:²

1. Second John is written to a lady and her children (a congregation) whereas 3 John is written to an individual. (2 John 1; 3 John 1)
2. The problem being addressed in 2 John is with many deceivers outside of the congregation, whereas the problem being addressed in 3 John is with one person inside the church. (2 John 7; 3 John 9)

3. Second John is written to address anyone who would consider entertaining the visiting false teachers, whereas 3 John is written about one person who refuses to entertain godly visitors. (2 John 10-11; 3 John 10)
4. Second John commands the congregation not to receive these false teachers, whereas 3 John encourages the welcoming of traveling godly ministers. (2 John 10-11; 3 John 5)
5. Just like 1 John, 2 John contains no personal names, whereas 3 John contains three personal names: Gaius, Diotrephes, Demetrius.

Drilling down just a moment on this last point above, as we open the text it becomes immediately clear that 3 John is a very personal letter. Second John was a general letter written to an entire congregation and was most likely intended to be read to the assembly. Third John is distinctly written to a very close friend of John, a man named Gaius. Additionally, John makes very specific mention of a trouble-maker within the congregation, a man named Diotrephes. Finally, John gives his personal endorsement of Demetrius who is the one who likely delivered this letter to Gaius.

One last point that we need to keep in mind, 3 John has number of key words. He uses the term *“dear friend”* a total of four times (v.1,2,5,11). In each case he is referencing Gaius thus demonstrating the great personal relationship that must have existed between the two men. John also employs the term *“truth”* or *“true”* a total of seven times (1,3 [twice],4,8,12 [twice]).³ We will see that in all of these references, except for the last one in v.12, John is using this term just as he has in the first two letters. They are a reference to the faithful, obedient lifestyle of Gaius, his congregation, and finally of Demetrius.

So let's get into text:

INTRODUCTION AND COMMENDATION OF GAIUS – v.1-8

As we dive into this first section, we are going to cover two things simultaneously. Notice that the first three verses actually form the *“greeting”* of the letter. Letters from the 1st century generally began with a greeting that included an identification of the sender, the recipient, a general blessing, and a word of praise. We will look at this briefly, but our primary focus will be to deal with John's specific words of commendation and encouragement to his dear friend, Gaius.

v.1-4:

Let's briefly address the form or structure of the first three verses which form the formal greeting. Greetings were very common to 1st century letters. This is a practice is not so different today. Look below at the table which compares the opening of 3 John to a modern letter:

<u>Section</u>	<u>3 John</u>	<u>Modern Example</u>
Sender	<i>the elder (v.1)</i>	For personal letters we write our names on the envelope. For business letters we always introduce ourselves in opening.
Recipient	<i>to my dear friend Gaius (v.1)</i>	Dear Joe
Blessing	<i>I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health (v.2)</i>	I hope this letter finds you and your family doing well
Praise	<i>I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth,,,,,(v.3)</i>	I heard of your recent graduation. I am so pleased to hear of this. I always knew you could do it.

Now, let's break into the text itself. In v.1 the sender identifies himself as ***"the elder"***. We are not going to spend time going back over this designation as it is the same 2 John. We have identified ***"the elder"*** as the Apostle John, and that carries forward here into this book. Secondly, we see that the recipient of the letter is a man named Gaius. Daniel Akin reminds us that there are three men of this name mentioned in the New Testament; here in 3 John, Gaius of Corinth (Rom. 16:23), and Gaius of Derbe (Acts 20:4). Gaius was a very common name in the Roman Empire and there is no reason to think that the Gaius of 3 John is the same Gaius as any of the other two references.⁴ John describes Gaius as ἀγαπητῶ (*agapeto*). This is a term of deep endearment. It is often translated in English as ***"beloved"***. In this case, I think ***"to my dear friend"*** is a more accurate depiction of what John was saying. Lastly, we notice that John makes clear that the basis of this relationship is the common shared ***"truth"*** between the men. This ***"truth"*** is their shared belief in Jesus Christ. Notice in v.3 John breaks into a very short prayer for his dear friend in v.2. His prayer is both physical and spiritual in nature. John knows that for Gaius to continue in the active work of his ministry and to address the issues within his congregation, he is going to need to have God's blessings of both physical and spiritual health.

In v.3-4 reveals much about Gaius' life. **What do we see in v. 3 regarding the spiritual condition of Gaius??**

Notice that John has received a report from "*some brothers*" who have seen the truth that Gaius professed. Additionally, we see that these brothers also testify that it is more than just a profession, it is Gaius' way of life. His actions match his very words!! **We also see a reference to the condition of the congregation, in general, in v.4. What is John saying about them?**

In v.4 John comments on the joy he has in seeing "*my children*" walking in the truth. Some scholars hold that John is referring specifically to Gaius and those whom he personally led to the Lord. However, most scholars would contend that this is a general reference to the congregation in general. John is expressing the great joy any pastor would have in seeing a body he has some leadership over, walking in the truth. That is, *knowing truth, believing truth, and living truth.*

v.5-6:

Read v.5-6 and give me your general thoughts on how the theme of John's commendation of Gaius is continuing??

In v.3-4 we saw the opening of the commendations of Gaius. Notice how these were general and do not specify a particular action. Look now at v.5-6 and notice that here we see John commending Gaius for some very specific actions. He is acknowledging how Gaius has treated "*these brothers*". **Who are "these brothers"??**

Look back to v.3. These are the same brothers that have returned back to John and given such a glowing testimony about Gaius. The difference now is that before the commendation was for his continued faithfulness to the gospel. Now, we see John commending him for how he has treated these brothers. Two places in these verses indicate Gaius' efforts: First in v.5 John references the direct testimony of the brothers regarding "*all your efforts*". Notice also in v.6 that these same men have also testified regarding Gaius' love "*before the church*".

Do you see any precedents being set by John in v.6??

Notice the last sentence in v.6. John is telling Gaius that he has done well in extending such great hospitality to these men. They have been well received, and cared for during their time with Gaius and thus sent on their way well fit for the next phase of their journey. Then John notes that such a treatment is a *“manner worthy of God”*. **What do you think John means by that phrase??**

It is clear that this is exactly how God would expect us to treat such men. These men were on mission for God. The end of v.5 makes clear that these men were complete strangers to Gaius. Yet despite this, Gaius recognized that they were missionaries of the gospel of Jesus Christ and he was going to ensure that they were well cared for during the time they were in his midst.

v. 7-8:

If there was any doubt as to the mission of *“these brothers”* John clears that up once and for all in v.7; very bluntly these men *“gone out for the sake of the name”*. Akin points out something very subtle, but also very significant in this phrase: **Can you see it??**

These men have not gone out for just any reason. They have gone out for the sake of *“the name”*.⁵ Their mission is specific, it is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ!! Notice next the very last phrase of v.7. John is telling us that these brothers have taken no support of any kind from the Gentiles. Two questions: **First, who do you think John is referring to when he says “the Gentiles”??**

The Greek term ἐθνικῶν (*ethnikon*) could refer to their nationality, or it could also refer to unbelievers. In this case it is clear that the term is being used to refer to unbelievers, pagans. Remember, this congregation is in Turkey. Thus except for the Jewish members of the congregation, Gaius and other members of the church were ethnically Gentiles. These ethnic Gentiles in Gaius’ church were openly supporting the missionaries. Therefore the reference here by the term Gentiles cannot be a reference to ethnicity, but is instead a reference to non-believers.

Secondly, why do you think they would not take any help from them, and why was this important for John to mention??

In the 1st century it was quite common for pagan Hellenistic street preachers to take advantage of the hospitality of others. They even expressed great pride in their success in “fleecing the countryside”.⁶ In my country, we often see people masquerade as homeless people. They will stand on the street corners of busy intersections, holding signs asking for food and money. I’ve personally witnessed some driving up into large parking lots in nice vehicles, get out in tattered clothes and cardboard sign and go to the street corners. Like the 1st century Hellenistic street preachers, these people are simply taking advantage of the hospitality and kindness of the general public. But these actions are no secret. Everyone knows that many of these street beggars are really not homeless, they are just lazy. So too the average person in the 1st century was suspect of the motives of itinerate street preachers or missionaries. The missionaries John is referring to would not accept such support from the very non-believers they were seeking to present the gospel to. They wanted nothing to come between these non-believers and the gospel, especially anything they might do which would give rise to questions about their true motives.

Verse 8 simply reaffirms the importance of believers and congregations doing exactly what Gaius has done. The Apostle Paul also fostered similar congregational support of missionary efforts. In our times, numerous missionary organizations follow this type of model. Missionaries receive their primary support from the home churches / organizations that have sent them. In many cases they also work to support themselves as well. Our efforts for the lost are selfless, and our actions must reflect that, just as these men did in their work.

CONDEMNATION OF DIOTREPHES – v.9-10

Akin provides some interesting context to these two verses. First, it is clear that the positive and glowing tone of the letter has just taken a sudden turn. John has moved from his commendation of Gaius and acknowledging the specific actions of a godly pastor, and turned to address a man who has come to exemplify just the opposite of Gaius. Diotrephes has clearly stood in opposition to the authority of John. The kind and loving personality of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, now gives way to his old nickname as one of the “*sons of thunder*”.

Let’s begin with a general question: **Read v.9 and tell me some of the key points John gives us.**

1. The first thing I would comment on is that there was clearly a previous letter from John to Diotrephes' church.
2. Diotrephes is most likely the pastor of this church. (It is generally thought that this is not the same church as Gaius' church, but the men most likely were acquainted.)
3. Diotrephes is an arrogant person who loves to put his wishes above the wishes of others.
4. Diotrephes is a person who loves being the leader and exercising his authority.
5. Diotrephes does not readily acknowledge the authority of John as a disciple of Christ, or in his pastoral role over the churches of the area.
6. Diotrephes was an insider. Unlike the false teachers of 2 John, the troublemaker in 3 John is one of the members of the congregation. Most likely he was the local leader of one of the congregations.

Many have speculated as to the particular issue which caused the conflict. Wise counsel would suggest that we should take care not to jump to conclusions on this matter. We simply are not given any reasons for the controversy, thus we should not try to force any. It does appear that the controversy was likely not doctrinal. Recall that both 1 & 2 John specifically address the doctrinal heresy of the false teachers. Here no such mention is made regarding Diotrephes, thus we can assume that doctrinal heresy is likely not the issue.

What does v.10 tell us about the actions of Diotrephes??

John is presenting four specific charges against Diotrephes in this verse:⁷

1. He is gossiping maliciously against John.
2. He refuses to provide hospitality to the traveling missionaries. Just the opposite behavior as that of Gaius.
3. Not only does Diotrephes not provide hospitality to them, but he also prevents the members of his congregation from doing so.
4. Finally, any of the members of his congregation who disobey him and do provide hospitality are put out of the church!!

The first portion of v.10 makes clear that John has no intention of letting this ungodly arrogance stand unchallenged. The English translation here is weak. The term εἰς (*ean*) is most often translated "*if*". This is accurate but it also conveys the message of an expected action. John

has every intention of going to Diotrephes and confronting him directly with his prideful, arrogant behavior.

PRAISE OF DEMETRIUS – v.11-12

In v.11 John employs the endearing term he has used for Gaius – “*dear friend*”. for the fourth and final time, Having just presented the contrasting examples of Diotrephes, and Gaius, John is providing the general command to imitate that which is good. **Who is it that we are supposed to imitate??**

Jesus is our supreme example. His actions are the ones we are to imitate in this life. Nonetheless, we all clearly have earthly role models. John knew this. In fact, his letter here in 3 John gives us three people to look to. Two are spoken of highly (Gaius and Demetrius), one is clearly not a role model (Diotrephes).

In v.12 John now presents an example of someone who, like Gaius, exemplifies the characteristics he is speaking about in v.11. **Look at v.12 and tell me what we can say about the testimony regarding Demetrius.**

There is a three-fold witness to the character of this man:⁸

1. The testimony of men who knew him was strong. He was well spoken of by all who knew him.
2. The testimony from the truth itself. Here John speaks of the fact that Demetrius’ devotion to the gospel of Jesus Christ was self-evident in every aspect of his life.
3. Finally, John himself adds his own personal endorsement to Demetrius’ character.

I want to give you just a couple more closing points on this section. First, it is widely believed that Demetrius was likely the person who carried the letter to Gaius. Therefore, the strength of this ringing endorsement would serve to introduce Demetrius to Gaius as a strong believer and leader in the church, not just a messenger. Secondly, the term used for “*testimony*” is actually *μεμαρτύρηται* (*memarturetai*). This is another example of the *perfect tense* like we saw so frequently in 1 John. **What did we say was the significance of this tense??**

The perfect tense indicates an action that occurred at some point in the past, but the impact / implications of the action carry forward into the present. When we apply this to these three testimonies regarding Demetrius, we see that they are made so much richer. He is a man who has a long-demonstrated character.

FAREWELL – v.13-15

Once again, we have gone quite long in addressing the body of this letter. This farewell is much like the ending of 2 John. The Apostle tells Gaius that he has much more to discuss with him, but he prefers to discuss it in person. He closes by placing a blessing of peace on him and conveying the heart-felt greetings of all the other friends there with John to Gaius.

With this, we close our study of the Epistles of John. It has been my great pleasure to be here with you for this week. I have been truly blessed to be here and look forward to seeing you again in the future!! May God bless each of you and use you greatly for His work.

ENDNOTES

¹ Daniel L. Akin. *The New American Commentary: vol. 38 1,2,3 John*. Edited by Richard R. Melick Jr., Paige Patterson, Curtis Vaughan. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2001. 235.

² Ibid. 236.

³ Ibid. 238.

⁴ Ibid. 239.

⁵ Ibid. 244.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. 248.

⁸ Ibid. 250-51.