

They Started on their Journey to Serve Jesus Christ

III John 1: 1-14

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Along the way somewhere, most of us lost the art of letter writing. It may have come with email, but for me it came earlier than that. Up until I graduated from college, I actually wrote letters. When I was sorting through my mother's stash of memories last year, I found all those letters I wrote my parents when I was away at college—so I know for sure that I used to write letters. One day I will sit down and read them—I wonder what I thought was important enough to actually write—you know cursive—then get a stamp and take it to the mailbox. What effort!

How much will be lost to the next generation because we don't write letters? There is a great news interview about the love letters written by Former president George H.W. Bush to his wife Barbara. The video in which he is interviewed by his granddaughter, talks about a whole generation that communicated through letters—and the treasured memories we have because they did.

We know that letter writing has been the means of communication for the Christian community since the first century. Where would our understanding of our faith be without the letters written to the early church? Tonight we will be looking specifically at a letter from John—the third book/letter of John. This is a letter addressed from,

“The elder, To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.”

Dear friend,

I know that your spiritual life is going well. I pray that you also may enjoy good health. And I pray that everything else may go well with you.

Some believers came to me and told me that you are faithful to the truth. They told me that you continue to live by it. That gave me great joy. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are living by the truth.

While we really do not know the specific community to which this letter was written, from the names included in the letter, it is believed to be a group of Gentile Christians with whom the writer was very familiar. Though we cannot be sure, John may have been instrumental in their conversion or at minimum involved in their growth as Christians. It is clear that the writer is proud of their testimony. I get that because I am nearing my 30th year of sending out students at

college graduations. Until Facebook, I really did not know what many of those students were doing. I could hope and pray that, like John, I could say,

“Some believers came to me and told me that you are faithful to the truth. They told me that you continue to live by it. That gave me great joy. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are living by the truth.”

For many of my former students, I no longer wonder about this. They are all over this country and around the world. “They started on their journey to serve Jesus Christ” and they are still at it. They do give me great joy when I see that they are teaching, sharing the Gospel, building churches, and leading others to Christ. I especially rejoice when they share that one of their own children comes to Jesus.

Let us continue on in John’s letter to Gaius:

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the believers. You are faithful even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. Please help them by sending them on their way in a manner that honors God. They started on their journey to serve Jesus Christ. They didn't receive any help from those who aren't believers. So we should welcome people like them. We should work together with them for the truth.

Just like those who provided for strangers in John’s letter, my former students have had others provide for them. That is how it should happen. We, as God’s instruments, should send you, and you should go out to serve Jesus Christ, and Christians in those places where you go to serve should provide and care for you. It is totally biblical.

But, just because it is biblical, just because it is right, just because it is just, doesn’t mean that it will turn out that way. Just like life can take a bad turn, so does John’s letter. . .

We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth. I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

Third John was written around 90 AD, and there had been adequate time for a church structure more similar to what we know as the traditional church to develop. “Outsiders” had arrived at the church to share in the work, but instead of being welcomed with hospitality, they were turned

away—and anyone who tried to provide hospitality was removed from the church. There is speculation about the reason this happened, but I am glad it is not stated specifically because it can happen anywhere for a number of reasons. The picture these verses describe is one which many of us have experienced—not everyone in the church lives a life that is pleasing to God.

What Should Happen:

- Hospitality shown to all
- All work together for the truth

What Can Happen Instead:

- Someone wants to be first
- Godly counsel is ignored
- Malicious gossip occurs
- Hospitality is not offered
- Others are prevented from offering hospitality
- Good people are driven from the church

For twenty years, I sent mostly traditional age students at graduation. For the past nine years, I have sent mostly adult students—some very adult. . . Adults are less apt to believe that the church is perfect, but you are not immune to hurt.

So, if it is a journey to serve Christ, and we can be quite certain that it will not be a perfect journey, what is the packing list? What is it that you need as you continue on your journey to serve Jesus Christ? What did the John say in this letter to answer that question?

Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone--and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true. I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

What are the instructions in this section of the letter?

1. Do good and resist those who would draw you into the dissention
 - a. *Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good.*
 - b. Leaders emerge in all situations where people gather. If you watched the television series *Lost*, it is a picture of this. In every situation there will be leaders and followers.

- c. Everyone is both a leader and a follower; it just depends on the situation.
 - d. John is saying, in this situation, those of you who are following—choose to follow good, not evil.
 - e. The problem is that sometimes evil can be disguised as good. Going back to the *Lost* series—you were never quite sure who was the good guy and who was the bad guy. Have you ever been convinced by someone to do something that they convinced you was right, only to realize in hindsight that it was not so? How do you make wise choices in whom to follow?
 - f. John points to the dividing line—it is truth. Not the world’s truth which is ever changing, but God’s truth which is always the same. We must be sure that we are following those who love, respect, and honor the truth. That is not easy to do, but Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” so maybe the phrase that has become somewhat commonplace is right, “What would Jesus do?” As simple as that is, our actions are often motivated by many factors completely alien to what Jesus would choose to do (or who to follow) in the same situation.
 - g. Matthew Henry sums up the problem:
 “Both the heart and mouth must be watched. The temper and spirit of Diotrephes was full of pride and ambition. It is bad not to do good ourselves; but it is worse to hinder those who would do good . . . Evil-workers vainly pretend or boast acquaintance with God. Let us **not** follow that which is proud, selfish, and of bad design, though the example may be given by persons of rank and power; but let us be followers of God, and walk in love, after the example of our Lord.”
 - h. Remember, just because someone is a leader doesn’t mean they are right, but in respect to their position it is crucial to understand their motivation and intent--then respond in ways that do not diminish your own spiritual walk and personal character. It is not so much about what they do—it is about what you do. How will those who are under your leadership (students, church members, children, etc.) perceive your actions?
2. Do that which you know to be of God to the best of your ability
- a. *Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.*
 - b. It is possible to be completely convinced about your “rightness” and not be righteous.
 - c. It is also possible to work very, very hard, but totally miss the point.
 - d. Why are you there? What is God’s purpose? So much of what we muddle in every day has little to do with God’s purpose—unless we consciously consider the long-term eternal consequences. This is not an easy task when we are lost in the mundane minutia of life!

- e. As Christians, everything we do in life has an eternal purpose. We can't allow ourselves to be swayed by a worldview which does not include a godly eternal purpose. We must "do all for the glory of God".
3. Value and keep your good name
- a. *Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone--and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.*
 - b. Matthew Henry says, "A name in the gospel, or a good report in the churches, is better than worldly honour."
 - c. Consider that you are writing your reference letter with your life. Every few months I receive a request for a reference letter. Someone is looking for a job, or trying to get into a graduate program and they want me to say good things about them. I have a file of these in my computer and there are three templates:
 - i. Superior,
 - ii. Areas of strength and then potential,
 - iii. Something positive and then the need for mentoring.
 - d. Which character template are you choosing? Demetrius chose the first one—he was "well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself". Now that is a reference letter!
 - e. Can you maintain that in difficult situations? It depends on the first two points—who will you follow, and will you do that which you know to be of God to the best of your ability?
4. Keep a support group and find a mentor
- a. *I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings.*
 - b. You need long distance friends who understand ministry and will provide a sounding board—hopefully you are gathering those now, but you also need a face-to-face mentor. If you are accepting a job or ministry position, think about whether the person hiring you is going to be a mentor. (If they continually check their watch while you are sharing your call or vision that is not a good sign.)
 - c. Mentoring follows the same pattern as leadership. You will mentor and you need to be mentored—it doesn't matter your age! When you are the top leader, it may change to an accountability partner, but that heart-to-heart communication with someone who will ask the tough questions is essential.

It is all there, right there in the one chapter book of Third John. Recently my grandson discovered that the book of James was missing in the Bible we bought him. Third John could be missing without our knowledge for some time! It is only fourteen verses—the second shortest book in the Bible. Yet, John shares with us the reality of good and evil even within the church —

and what our responsibility and response must be. He provides a packing checklist for your journey in life and ministry.

1. Do good and resist those who would draw you into the dissention
2. Do that which you know to be of God to the best of your ability
3. Value and keep your good name
4. Keep a support group and find a mentor

I stand before you today because of God's grace and because I have tried to live by these maxims. I sat for some time trying to think if there was something crucial that was important to my life of service that was not in these verses. From growing up in a pastor's home to serving in Christian schools, churches and Bible colleges, I think I have seen everything—but something will still surprise me tomorrow.

I have seen the wonderful, the sad, the courageous, the disappointing, the godly, and the evil. I have seen many fall away from service because they saw only Diotrephes and not Demetrius.

Some followed Diotrephes, while others were disillusioned by him. I pray that each of you will follow in the path of Demetrius and that one day we will say of you:

Some believers came to me and told me that you are faithful to the truth. They told me that you continue to live by it. That gave me great joy. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are living by the truth.