

## POSTCARDS: III John III John

### INTRODUCTION:

With our year-long theme of “Little Is Much”, last week, I began to review three of the littlest letters in the New Testament. These three epistles are so short that Chuck Swindoll has called them “postcards” instead of “letters”. Last week, we looked at the book of II John. This week, I want us to look at the book of III John.

It is a little complicated to determine which book is the shortest in the Bible. Do you count verses? Or words? Or letters? And if you count letters, do you count the letters in the English translation (and if so, which translation) or do you count the letters in the Greek edition in which the book was originally written? And I know, who really cares?

Well, if you really care, III John is the shortest book in the Greek New Testament.

There are only five or six New Testament epistles that were written to individuals. Some might dispute if II John was written to an individual lady or if it was written to a church. But there is no doubt that III John, a letter about the importance of hospitality, was written to an individual by the name of Gaius.

In this postcard, we are introduced to three people. There is a lot we can learn from these three people. So let's do it. Let's read this little letter and see what we can learn by reading someone else's mail.

*The elder,*

*To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.*

<sup>2</sup> *Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. <sup>3</sup> It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. <sup>4</sup> I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*

<sup>5</sup> *Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. <sup>6</sup> They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. <sup>7</sup> It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. <sup>8</sup> We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.*

<sup>9</sup> *I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. <sup>10</sup> 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.*

*<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. <sup>14</sup> 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.*

## **I. GAIUS – Who Extended Hospitality**

The first person we meet in this postcard is a man by the name of Gaius. We meet him first because he is the one to whom this little letter was written.

From what John says about Gaius, we can know that he was strong of soul, steadfast in the truth, hospitable to strangers and generous for ministry.

He was strong of soul. John writes to him, *“I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”* I almost get the impression that Gaius was an individual who was suffering from sickness or other infirmity. When John says that he prays that his physical health may be as good as his spiritual health, that leads me to believe that Gaius was ailing somehow.

It often seems that when we are sick of body, we suffer spiritually, too. We can become “Why Babies” and ask God, “Why did this have to happen to me? Why am I suffering since I’m a good guy and I do lots of good things for You and for the church? Why should this happen to me?”

And we can go beyond that to accusing God of being unjust, unfair and unloving. After all, if God were just, fair and loving, I’d be healthy and others, who are not nearly so spiritual as I am, would be the ones who are sick or injured right about now.

Know this: God does not always reward righteousness with physical health. Religious people get sick and die. But the way righteous people handle physical weakness can be a witness. Mark that down and tuck it away for when sickness comes upon you: you can use it for good and for God if you will. In the case of Gaius, as his body became weaker, his soul

must have got stronger and now John was praying that his body would catch up to the vitality and health of his soul.

John also characterizes Gaius as a man who was steadfast in the truth. Just as in the postcard of II John, so in this postcard, John uses the word "truth" frequently in the first few verses. Clearly, truth mattered to John.

And truth must matter to the church today. There are those who say that it does not really matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. Some will tell you that it doesn't matter much what you believe about Jesus so long as you believe in Jesus. You will hear people say that you don't really need to know what the Bible says so long as you've accepted Jesus as your savior.

But John must have believed that truth is a big deal. He wrote about the importance of truth when he wrote II John and he commends Gaius for being faithful to the truth and for walking in the truth. That is, he praises Gaius for living a life that reflects the truth. And then he says he has no greater joy than to hear that his children are adhering to and living by the truth. By "his children", I have no doubt that he means those people to whom he had taught the truth and whom he led to the Lord.

That makes perfect sense. Since John had devoted his life to the teaching of the truth of the Gospel, it would be a sad thing to think that he had wasted his life with some people. But it is a joyous thing to think that he had invested his life wisely in people who continue to live by the truth they were taught.

Gaius was strong of soul steadfast in the truth and also hospitable to strangers. The scene that John painted was one where Christian "brothers" from the region where John was, were traveling and ministering to the church where Gaius was. Although Gaius did not personally know these men, he knew that they were brothers in Christ and that was enough. So he extended Christian fellowship and hospitality to them. John says that these Christian brothers have bragged on Gaius for the love he was showing them. John says that it was for the sake of The Name (that is, The Name of Jesus Christ) that they left home and went to other churches to serve and John says that they ought to be shown the kind of hospitality that Gaius was extending to them.

And then, on top of this, Gaius was going to go beyond just showing hospitality to these brothers while they were with him, he was going to be generous when he sent them on their way to serve other churches.

Such hospitality and generosity ought to be hallmarks of Christians today. When we have visiting missionaries or guest speakers, we ought to make

sure that they are welcomed with warm hospitality and then sent on their way with generous support.

Rick and Lisa Sutton are with us today and Rick, of course, has filled the pulpit in my absence before. It always pleases me to know that somebody invites them to Sunday lunch after they have worshipped with us. That is an expression of Christian hospitality of the sort that John has written.

And as to expressions of generosity, that is the reason that we not only underwrite our fall revival expenses, we also give you an opportunity to support the revival financially. It just would not be right for us to host a great revival and not give you a chance to express your appreciation through your generosity. After all, John specifically says that we are to send these folk on their way in a manner worthy of God. Now that's a high standard! But that's the standard John has set for Gaius and for the rest of us.

So Gaius is commended because his Christian character and his generous hospitality were commendable.

## **II. DIOTREPHESES - Who Excluded Hospitality**

But the second man we read about was not commended...because his character and his behavior were not commendable. This man's name is Diotrephes.

John tells us a lot about Diotrephes when he refers to him as "Diotrephes, who loves to be first." Ever known anyone like that? They want to be the first to get recognition. They want to be the first to be thanked. They want to be the first to know the gossip...and repeat it. They want to be the first in the limelight. They tend to be loud and intrusive because they want attention.

The phrase, "Diotrephes, who loves to be first" is now forever a part of the inspired Scriptures. It is there for all time. What a sad thing to have said about you!

We can probably imagine why Diotrephes was the way he was. Diotrephes acted as if he were conceited, thinking first about himself. And since he thought of himself first, he expected everyone else to do so, too.

Not only was Diotrephes likely conceited, he was also rebellious. He rebelled against John's influence in the church. It would appear that John might have written to the church and asked for the opportunity to come to the church to speak but Diotrephes would have nothing to do with him and seemed to have tried to prevent John from scheduling a visit.

Diotrephes was also a malicious gossip. He was not just telling tales about other people, he was doing so with the intent of doing them harm.

Diotrephes was inhospitable. In contrast to Gaius, Diotrephes would not welcome the other brothers. And then, not content to simply be inhospitable toward visiting Christians, he was dictatorial and tried to prevent others in the church from welcoming them, too. And if anyone doesn't go along with Diotrephes' antagonistic ways, he kicks them out of the church! In short, Diotrephes was a little dictator.

I once served a church that had suffered from a Diotrephes in its ranks. It was before my time at the church but this guy had ruled the roost for years. If people started to stand up to him, he would threaten to take his offerings and leave the church. And for years, people kept caving in to him and letting him have his way. Until one night in an elders' meeting, one of the most soft-spoken, easy-going and kind-hearted elders stood up to him and told him he was a little dictator (and that is a quote). That modern day Diotrephes got red in the face, shouted that he was going to leave and take his money with him and predicted that the church would fold in a few months. You know what happened, don't you? With him gone, the church began to heal, grow and flourish.

Again, all of that happened before my time with that church but people were still grateful to the farmer who stood up to the dictator.

I want each of you to do some serious soul-searching and ask yourself if you are a Diotrephes. Be honest. And if you see those self-centered tendencies, change your ways...for the good of the church. John specifically says not to imitate Diotrephes.

### **III. DEMETRIUS – Who Experienced Hospitality**

That last name mentioned in this postcard is that of Demetrius. We don't know much about this brother but we know enough. John says of him that everyone spoke well of him. He had such a sterling reputation that no one could find something bad to say about him.

When Paul wrote about the characteristics of the elders, he said they were to be blameless. That does not mean that they are to be perfect but they are to have such a reputation that if someone levels an accusation against them, people will assume it is untrue.

Demetrius was that kind of person. He had earned an excellent reputation. He was commended by his brothers in Christ, his beliefs in Christ and even John, himself. John knew Demetrius to be an exemplary man and he commended him to Gaius.

**CONCLUSION:**

It seems that we are always looking for good examples and worthy role models. We want people we can look up to and people we can encourage our youth to emulate. As John put it in verse 11, *“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.”*

In our text for today, we have three examples and we can learn from all three. From Gaius, we can learn what it means to have a healthy soul because we are walking in the truth – and we ought to imitate that. From Diotrephes, we can learn what it means to be self-centered and dictatorial – and we ought to avoid that. And from Demetrius, we can learn what it means to have a good reputation with everyone – and we ought to strive for that.

John wrote, *“We ought therefore to show hospitality...so that we may work together for the truth.”* According to John, our hospitality is part of our Christian ministry and advances the truth of the Gospel. Is hospitality that important? It sure is! After all, Jesus said that it is by our love that all men will know we are his disciples and love must be demonstrated in actions if it is really love at all.

**INVITATION:** #429 – *“They’ll Know We Are Christians”*