

WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE TRUTH

3 John 1:1-14

Key Verse: 1:8

“We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.”

This letter is addressed to “my dear friend Gaius.” While 1 John was circulated to churches in general, and 2 John is addressed to a local church, 3 John is a personal letter. In order to understand it, we need to know the context in which it was written. In those times, itinerant evangelists traveled among the churches to spread apostolic teachings. This was the only way in which most people could receive the gospel truth. As the itinerant evangelists visited each house church, they needed hospitality. But a man named Diotrephes refused to welcome them and opposed anyone who tried to do so. In this way, he hindered the gospel ministry. This was the situation of the mission field. John wrote this letter to encourage believers to work together for the truth to fight against gospel enemies. Then and now, there are gospel enemies to contend with in our mission field. These enemies spread malicious nonsense against God’s people to discredit them. In our times, we see this through the Internet and mass media constantly. These gospel enemies are numerous and strong. In order to fight against them we need to learn to work together for the truth. Let us learn how to do so.

First, why we need to work together for the truth (1-8). In verse 1 the author identifies himself and greets his recipient: “The elder, To my dear friend Gaius, who I love in the truth.” This is the first of four times that John calls Gaius “dear friend” (1,2,5,11), revealing their intimate relationship. This love relationship was not merely a human friendship; it was based on the gospel truth. It is amazing that the great Apostle John humbled himself to call Gaius his dear friend repeatedly. There is no hint of authoritarian leadership in his words. How could he have developed such a humble and loving character? John must have been moved by the example of Jesus. Though Jesus is the Son of God and his Lord and Savior, he called John “friend” (Jn 15:13-15).

Here we learn that one of the keys to be fruitful is to form friendships in the Lord.

Verse 2 is John's prayer for Gaius¹: "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." This was a customary expression of the times, stated as, "If you are well, that is good; I am well."² It was also a sincere prayer for Gaius and his family members to have good health, and for the prosperity of their household and business. John knew that Gaius was a man of truth and his soul was prospering as a result. John's prayer was that his physical wellbeing would match the spiritual. Christian love should be practiced with such a wholistic view of other believers. We believe in God who is able to bless us abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that we need, we will abound in every good work (2Co 9:8).

However, we need to keep this teaching in the context of the whole gospel message and not overemphasize prosperity like "prosperity gospel" preachers. Relying heavily on this verse, they claim that all God's children should enjoy health and wealth in abundance all the time. They also quote some Old Testament promises that were made specifically to the people of Israel.³ Their teaching leads to the dangerous inferences that: 1) if someone is poor and sick they lack faith; 2) if someone is wealthy and healthy they are spiritually good. These inferences are not true. For example, the Bible tells us that many heroes of faith were poor, destitute, and naked and even became martyrs (Heb 11:35-38). No one can honestly read Luke's gospel and avoid Jesus' words of scathing rebuke toward the wealthy who were not rich toward God (Lk 6:24; 12:21; 16:19). In fact, prosperity preachers ignore Jesus' primary call for his followers to deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him, who suffered and died for us (Mk 8:34).

¹ There are many men named Gaius in the Bible (Ac 19:29; 20:4; Ro 16:23; 1Co 1:14; 3Jn 1:1), which was a common name at that time. All of them seem to be influential leaders in the church.

² Stott, John R.W., *The Letters of John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988) p. 226.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

After greeting and blessing Gaius, John commends him in two ways: for walking in the truth, and for showing love for brothers and sisters. First of all, Gaius was faithful to the truth (3-4). Verse 3 says, “It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it.” Some believers had come to stay with Gaius and observed his life of faith. They testified that he was faithful to the truth and continued to walk in it. This means that he believed the gospel sincerely and lived by what he believed. He vigorously pursued the truth, indicated in uprightness of conduct and character. This was not hidden, but visible to everyone. He let the light of Christ shine through him in that dark world.⁴ Usually when someone pursues the truth vigorously, they become dogmatic and legalistic and cause divisions. But Gaius was different because the truth he sought was Jesus, not mere doctrine. Jesus clearly declared, “I am the...truth” (Jn 14:6). Anyone who seeks Jesus in this way develops sound character and bears the fruits of the Spirit in their lives. People like to be around such a person and they naturally speak well of them. When John heard the report about Gaius, he was full of joy and said, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (4). Apparently, Gaius was one of John’s spiritual sons. Anyone who walked in the truth was a source of joy to John. This was the fruit of his ministry.

Secondly, Gaius loved brothers and sisters (5-6a). John also commended Gaius for his love: “Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love.” Gaius was not only faithful to the truth; he was also faithful in serving brothers and sisters in love. This means that his service was not arbitrary and occasional but impartial and consistent; it was his lifestyle. Though the visiting brothers and sisters were strangers to Gaius, he welcomed them warmly and served them wholeheartedly as if they were his own family members. His generous hospitality moved their hearts and they naturally told the church about his love. When we consider John’s commendations of Gaius, we find that he lived a balanced life. Gaius was faithful to the truth and faithful in loving others. He held to the truth in love, and he loved in the truth. In fact, he lived in truth and love faithfully.

⁴ Boice, James Montgomery, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004) p. 168.

Faithfulness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22), and one of the important marks of God's children. It is a distinguishing characteristic of people of integrity. How could Gaius become such a faithful person in truth and love? When he sincerely followed Jesus as his disciple, Jesus' truth and love transformed him and enabled him to be so. Jesus is the source of truth and love, who became the spring of life, welling up to eternal life for all who believe in him. As we follow Jesus, we should all become--like Gaius--influential people of integrity in our times.

After commendation, John politely requested Gaius: "Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God" (6b). Gaius' visitors were not just ordinary people but God's ambassadors. God had worked through them to bless his people in the most important way. They should be honored as God's servants. They should be thanked for their teaching, appreciated, and given all necessary provisions for their next journey. This would be a great encouragement to them, and they would work all the more to preach the gospel. Verse 7 makes the reason for this even more clear: "It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans" (7). Here "the Name" means Jesus. The visitors came and went out in the name of Jesus. Gaius and his household served in the name of Jesus. Ultimately everything was done for the honor and glory of Jesus. When Jesus is at the center of a family, church, or community it becomes thankful, loving, and harmonious. When everything is done for the sake of Jesus, the community becomes healthy, vibrant, joyful, and strong.

In verse 8 John uses the word "we" to develop a general principle. He said: "We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth." "We" includes John and all believers. This verse tells us why we have to show hospitality to gospel workers. The word "ought" indicates that it is Christian duty which originates from the truth. It does not arise merely from a sense of obligation, but from the truth in our hearts that motivates us to show hospitality. The key is the truth. The truth is not just a concept; it is Jesus. Itinerant evangelists worked for the truth by preaching the gospel. Other believers supported them by showing hospitality. In this way, they worked together for the truth. For example, when missionaries are sent to another country, they work to preach the gospel to the people there.

Those who remain in the sending church pray for them and support them financially and emotionally when they need help. Without working together it is hard to carry out the world mission command. The mission field is a combat zone against Satan and his agents. We are all weak and vulnerable, like sheep among wolves. But when we pray together, cover each other's weak points, and love one another by showing hospitality, we can overcome Satan's power and carry out God's work very effectively (Ecc 4:9-12).

However, it is not easy to work together. Why? We are so busy with our own survival and success that we have no time to care about others. Most of all, we are self-absorbed by our sinful nature. We should be transformed from self-centered to Christ-centered and other-centered by the help of the Holy Spirit. This is the mark of Christian maturity. When we serve others with a Christ-centered mindset, we are full of joy and free from our self-absorption. Furthermore, God rewards such people and blesses them. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:19-20). We just need to make sure that what we are doing is for the truth. 2 Corinthians 13:8 says, "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth." When we work together for the truth, we can overcome all kinds of obstacles within and without and accomplish God's purpose.

We find a good example in Daniel and his three friends. They were sent into Babylonian exile, where their captors tried to force them to compromise their faith and identity as God's people. In that oppressive environment, they prayed together and encouraged each other, building up their fellowship in God. In this way they began to shine like the brightness of the heavens in that dark situation (Da 12:3). Another good example is the Philippian church. When Apostle Paul was imprisoned for the sake of the gospel, they defended and confirmed the gospel together with him (Php 1:7). They also supported him practically by sending people to aid him with generous gifts (Php 4:15-18). Encouraged by them, Apostle Paul could advance the gospel even among the palace guard (Php 1:13). This was one of the seeds of evangelism for the entire Roman Empire. To be sure, there are gospel enemies in our times, and we face considerable challenges, within

and without, to carry out world mission and campus evangelism. But when we simply work together for the truth, God will surely bless our ministry and bear fruit. In this new fall semester, let us work together for the truth!

Second, two examples, negative and positive (9-14). After commending Gaius and giving clear instructions to work together for the truth, John mentioned two different people he should pay attention to. The first is Diotrephes. Verse 9 says, "I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us." Though John had issued a written instruction about welcoming itinerant evangelists, Diotrephes rejected it and would not welcome John. This means he did not acknowledge John's spiritual authority as an apostle (ESV). He asserted his own authority as a local church leader. He spread malicious nonsense to discredit Apostle John. Not satisfied with that, he used his own authority to stop church members from welcoming other believers. If anyone did not obey him, he put them out of the church (10).

John described his real problem as "who loves to be first." We would say today that he had a narcissistic mindset. He was greedy for position and power--a man of selfish ambition. This kind of person does not seek God's glory or work for the Name of Jesus. They seek their own glory and work for their own name. When a person like this becomes a leader in a church, division and strife will surely follow. This is why Apostle Paul said, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility consider others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Php 2:3-4). John said, "So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us" (10a). John could not overlook this challenge to his apostolic authority. He would take disciplinary action against Diotrephes. John would expose what he was saying and doing in public and rebuke him.

Here we can find a great contrast between Gaius and Diotrephes. Gaius was walking in the truth, loving brothers and sisters, showing hospitality to strangers, and had respect and love for Apostle John. In contrast, Diotrephes ignored the truth, loved himself more than others, prohibited hospitality and was rebellious toward Apostle John. Gaius built up the church while Diotrephes tore down the church. Gaius encouraged people

while Diotrephes discouraged people. Gaius shined the light of Christ while Diotrephes extinguished the light of Christ. Gaius worked together for the truth while Diotrephes scattered others and opposed the truth.

Though Gaius was doing well at the time, John worried that he might be badly influenced by Diotrephes. So John said, “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good” (11a). Everyone is an imitator. It is easy to imitate what is evil. Though we may criticize such a person as Diotrephes, we may naturally do the same thing he did. So we should be careful in choosing what we imitate. We should intentionally try to imitate what is good. Then John said, “Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God” (11b). Here John tells us how we can distinguish true Christians from false Christians. Those who do good, imitating God, are true Christians. Those who do evil do not see God and are false believers. Let us pray that we may grow to be like Jesus by imitating what is good.

Another person John recommended was Demetrius⁵. He may have been one of the itinerant evangelists. He also carried this letter. He was well spoken of by everyone--and even by the truth itself (12). It was because he lived by the truth so genuinely that he was transformed by it. He became a man of good influence whose lifestyle was confirmed by the truth itself. John also spoke well of him, and John did not hand out endorsements lightly.

John had much more to say to Gaius. However, he did not want to do so in a letter, but face to face, in person (13-14a). Talking face to face is beyond comparison to any other kind of fellowship, including online. Talking face to face is the way to build up a love relationship. John’s final greeting was, “Peace to you.” This peace comes from God. We desperately need this peace in this present time of turmoil. John’s closing remark expressed the friendly greetings between the two house churches (14b).

⁵ This Demetrius is not to be confused with the silversmith who opposed gospel work through Apostle Paul (Ac 19:24,38).

We are living in times which are hostile to gospel truth. Gospel enemies are looking for opportunities to destroy Christian faith. Gospel enemies are strong. If we fight them individually, we may be defeated. But when we work together for the truth, God will help us to triumph over them. Let us work together for the truth!