

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of John III

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THE BOOK of John III

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The third epistle of John is concerned with the positive side of the question of Christian hospitality, so that together these two epistolary fragments (2 John and 3 John) give a comprehensive statement on the subject. We decided that the second epistle was written to a fellowship rather than an individual, but it is clear that the third is addressed to an individual believer, one Gaius. There are in fact three individuals mentioned in these verses (see also 9, 12) and the whole theme of the epistle centres upon them. Whereas in the second epistle John is warning against giving hospitality to false teachers who are the emissaries of anti-Christ, here he commends individuals for extending hospitality to true missionaries and rebukes Diotrephes for refusing to do so. We cannot be certain who this Gaius is to whom John writes - three people of this name are mentioned in the New Testament, Gaius of Corinth (1 Cor 1:14, Rom 16:23) who was, as we gather from the reference in Romans, a hospitable man; Gaius of Macedonia (Acts 19:29); and Gaius of Derbe (Acts 20:4). The plain truth is that we do not know whether John's Gaius was one of these or some other man, although one tradition maintains that it is Gaius of Derbe, and sanctified imagination almost wants it to be Gaius of Corinth, 'host of the whole Church'. Note once again John's emphasis on 'love in the truth'. Doubtless there would be a strong bond of natural affection existing between John and Gaius, but what John refers to is something infinitely deeper, for they were united in the fellowship of the truth of God. This is the safest, as it is the deepest, kind of friendship and love.

2) 1:2-4

The phrase 'above all things' in 2 is better translated 'all respects' and refers to Gaius' well-being rather than to John's wish. What John is saying in effect is: 'I can only hope that your physical health and circumstances will match your spiritual health; if it does, you will be happy man indeed'. For the apostle, the health of the soul is the supreme concern, but it is significant to see the balance John maintains between the soul and the body. There is certainly no place in the New Testament for an attitude so spiritual that it disdains to consider the needs of the body. Discipline is one thing, but neglect of one's health is quite another. The Psalmist says that 'God knows our frame and remembers that we are dust, and we ought to remember it too.' The body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body (1 Cor 6:13) and the desire to burn out for Him gives us no warrant for taking liberties with it that dishonours His concern for it.

The reference in 3 seems to be to a particular occasion on which some travelling brethren had returned to their home fellowship and reported on their visit to Gaius, telling how Christianly and hospitably they had been welcomed, received and entertained by him in his home, and what a blessing it had been to them to share fellowship with one who was so obviously walking in the truth. In one sentence John thus paints for us a whole picture of early Church life, and what a rich, warm picture it is! Well might John rejoice (4) in such an evidence of true Christian grace and love at work among his converts!

3) 1:5-6

The RSV makes 5 read 'especially to strangers', and the NEB, 'the brethren, strangers though they are to you'. John is not referring to two different groups of people here, but rather to Gaius' known hospitality for Christian brethren whom he had not before met but with whom he instantly recognised a spiritual affinity. He opened his heart and his home to them without reserve. This is a New Testament emphasis (see Matt 10:40-42; 25:35,38; Heb 13:2), but the fact that John sees fit to emphasise it here may be some indication that it was not as widely practised as it might have been. Certainly it is a much needed word for our own day. Hospitality to strangers in our midst is one chief means of promoting a true and living sense of fellowship, and it includes both the friendly word of welcome to someone who looks a trifle 'out of it' and the warm invitation home for supper after evening worship. There is a great ministry of real and effectual Christian service awaiting those who have a little sanctified imagination and an awareness of how longingly some lonely souls seek the kind of friendship they are able to give them. If, like Gaius, we regard our homes as a stewardship committed to us by God, we will not be slow to put them at His service in this way, and find a wide variety of humble, yet rewarding, pieces of Christian service waiting to be done. In this sense it may also be said that charity begins at home!

4) 1:6b-8

The phrase 'bring forward' in 6 is almost a technical term, and refers to financial and other practical help given to these travelling missionaries of the gospel to enable them to continue on the next stage of their journey 'as befits God's service' (RSV). This, then, is a clear word on the assumption of financial responsibility by the Church for the missionaries it sends out to bear the message of the gospel. There is something very important here. The missionary endeavour of the established churches is sometimes criticised by evangelical folk as being less on 'faith' lines than that of so-called 'faith' missions'. But what are we to say of those 'faith' missions who succeed in balancing their books at the end of a financial year only at the expense of the missionaries on the field who voluntarily accept a substantial reduction in their allowances for the year? And what of those missions which are sometimes able to send only a percentage of the monthly allowance to their missionaries and in some months no allowance at all? The result of this system is that missionaries have to spend time in prayerful concern about how they are going to live and make ends meet. But this assuredly ought not to be the burden of a missionary's prayer life. It is the responsibility of the Church at home, not the missionary on the field, to find the money with which to sustain both the work and the worker. Is it not better, and more in accord with this word of John's here, to send out regular and full remittances to missionary personnel, even if it should mean temporary debt on the home front, then ask the Church at home to meet its responsibilities? At least this puts the burden, and the anxiety, in the proper place. Missionaries have burden enough with the work they are engaged in, without having thrust upon them any care or concern for their means of existence.

5) 1:6b-8

There is another point of practical importance in these verses which we need to note. The fact that these Christian brethren take nothing from the Gentiles for their support is an added reason why the Church should support them, and this is a useful pointer to our Christian duty when we are considering the relative apportionment of our tithe to specifically Christian work and to more general charitable and philanthropic work. It is, of course, the Christian's duty and privilege, as it should be his joy, to have on his heart every kind of true philanthropy (distinct from specifically Christian work); but it should be remembered that such philanthropic work can claim support from a wide circle of non-Christian people in a way that Christian work does not. Christian work depends on the support of Christian people. As Stott puts it, "There are many good causes which Christians may support; but they must support their brethren to whom the world should not be asked to contribute" and to whom the world is little likely to contribute much. This does not mean or imply that Christians should contribute only to specifically Christian causes to the exclusion of charitable and philanthropic work, but there does need to be a certain realism in recognising that for the Christian, Christian work must always be the priority.

6) 1:9-10

These verses introduce the next figure in the epistle. Diotrephes has been opposing John's authority and disputing his influence in the Church. There are several interesting suggestions as to what lies behind this dispute. Some think that it is explained by the known tension that grew up between apostolic authority and what became known as the monarchical episcopate (the rule of a single bishop with authority over a group of presbyters). Diotrephes would on this interpretation be the lawful bishop who was chafing at what he considered interference on John's part). Barclay suggests that it may reflect the tension between the apostolic ministry and the local rule of elders. (The word 'presbyter' and 'bishop' are interchangeable and synonymous in the Greek). Whether it is a question of the episcopacy or not, it seems clear that personal ambition lies at the root of it. Perhaps it was a simple case of the clash of personalities and of personal ambition on the part of one strong-minded member (one does not need to introduce episcopacy to explain this!). Lust for power in the church is a terrible thing, and nothing could be more disastrous for the well-being of the fellowship. One has only to read John's estimate of Diotrephes' slanderous gossip and his influence in undermining his teaching to realise how dangerous this man was and how necessary it was to deal firmly and effectively with him.

7) 1:10b-12

Diotrephes was not content with maligning the Apostle; he went so far as to prevent the other members of the fellowship from receiving the travelling missionaries and preachers on pain of excommunication. This evokes from John an exhortation to Gaius lest even he might be influenced by this powerful opposer. (It is astonishing how even fine and good people can be browbeaten into attitudes they do not really believe in by a powerful, overbearing personality). Beware, John seems to say, of being enmeshed by him and so influenced that you are led away from the true and the good. This is a warning that is always necessary when Diotrephes is about. It is clear that in the reference to doing evil in 11 John has Diotrephes in mind; and the mention of doing good as clearly brings the name of Demetrius to his lips. The insistence that this Demetrius has a good report of all men indicates that he was one of those whom Diotrephes was refusing to receive into the fellowship and forbidding others to receive. John hastens to assure Gaius that Demetrius is fully acceptable and worthy of being received without reserve (see 8). The details of John's commendation of Demetrius are full of interest and significance, and we shall turn to them in the next Note.

8) **1:12**

It is perhaps doubtful whether this Demetrius can be positively identified any more than Gaius can; but one ingenious suggestion is that he is the Demas who is said to have forsaken Paul in 2 Tim 4:10 (Demas is a contracted form of Demetrius). This is of course only conjecture, but it may be a very fruitful one, for it would indicate that Demas had been restored to grace following his distressing backsliding in earlier years. John would therefore be saying to Gaius and the Church, "Whatever you may have known or heard of him in the past, that is over and done with: all is well with him now, Gaius, therefore receive him for my sake." What John says of the good report that Demetrius has is significant in this respect. That he should have a good report 'of the truth itself' can only mean that the truth he professed was manifestly shown forth in his life, shining through for all to see. With such a witness and confirmation, why should any hesitate to receive him? But in fact a backslider's re-instatement into real fellowship is often made very difficult, and sometimes impossible, because there are Christians who never forgive a man when he has gone wrong, not even when God forgives him. Humans are very much more harsh and pitiless towards one another on the question of sin than God is. When He forgives He forgets, but some Christians never allow others to live down their sins. Was this part of the reason why Diotrephes refused to receive Demetrius? If so, it throws a significant light on the kind of man he was. Remember Paul's words in Gal 6:1: "... ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness".

9) 1:12-14

As a further comment on these verses we include a Note from the Readings of the Gilcomston South Church Record, by the Rev. William Still:

"Seldom in the space of a few sentences can such a contrast in characters have been seen. If Diotrephes is the worst type, Demetrius is the best. The principal thing about this man is that he is transparent. He is loved by all because all see into his heart, and they see into his heart because there is nothing there to hide. We sometimes assume that quiet folk are deep, but what do we mean by deep? Do we mean profound or dark? The wells of salvation are deep, but not dark; they are pure and clear, and those who partake of them should combine in their characters the utmost transparency with depths. Jesus said we must become like little children - and little children are not only simple, but wise. Read these three short verses again, slowly, and see a picture of a true Christian in the Church. We have some in our own fellowship who are loved by all. Do not let us assume that they do not also have to wrestle with sin and self and Satan, but their eyes being open to all the facts about themselves and the powers of evil, they are free, and can afford to be sunny and bright, transparent and friendly".

10) 1:13-14

The thought is almost identical here with that of 2 John 12. There is a fitness and significance in John's final word to Gaius - 'Peace be unto thee', for Gaius had in fact to cope with the most unfortunate dissension stirred up by Diotrephes, and it is an indication of the tender care and concern John had for the distressed leader that he should express his hopes and prayers in this way. We could not doubt that the receiving of such an epistle as this would have been a great encouragement to Gaius and brought a new sense of confidence and peace to his heart as he read it. The prayers and benedictions of apostles are not mere pious figures of speech, but are with power to convey the blessings of which they speak. Notice how John designates the believers in 14 - 'friends', not brethren'. There is an echo here of our Lord's words in John 15:15 It needs hardly be emphasised that as in 1,3 and 2 John 1, it is something much deeper than natural friendship that John refers to. The greeting to each believer 'by name is a very beautiful touch, again perhaps echoing our Lord's words in John 10:3, "He calleth his own sheep by name". This is a timely reminder that each individual matters in the fellowship; we are not units or digits, but names, written on the hands and in the heart of God. And if we mean as much as this to Him, should we mean less to one another?