

Recognize and Imitate Good

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is the shortest letter in the New Testament, and in fact, at 219 Greek words, it is the shortest book in the whole Bible. What we usually refer to as III John, is more of a memo than a full letter, and as such, it is shorter than even a good many of the individual psalms or any given chapter in the letters of Paul; but that does not mean that this little memo does not contain some intrigue, as well as a window on the earliest days of the Church. Today on Groundwork we dig into III John. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are continuing in a four-part series – this is now the third program of looking at what we are calling the memos of the New Testament. These are very, very short letters that are near the very, very end of the New Testament: II John, III John, Philemon, Jude – that will be the final program, on Jude – but today we are looking at III John; pretty sure that the same person who wrote III John for sure wrote II John; they are both very, very short; probably is the same person who wrote I John; maybe the same person who wrote the Gospel of John, although there are long debates on all of that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; but you know, you might ask: What are we doing focusing on II John and III John and Jude and Philemon – these little memos, as we call them, in the New Testament? What we are doing, actually, is a time-honored tradition in the Reformed churches. It is called *lectio continua*, which is, you start at the beginning of the Bible and you kind of preach through without skipping stuff; so we thought: Why not? We have done series on some of the major books and some of the major themes, but there are treasures, both small and great, in the Bible, and we do not want to skip over anything, so here we are.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here we are; and like II John, which we looked at in the previous program in this series, in III John the author actually does not identify himself as John. He only calls himself The Elder, and in this case that is the Greek word *presbyter*. This is not an elderly person or an elder statesman, this is an office in the church – an elder – just like we have elders and deacons today. So the author here refers to himself only as The Elder, as someone who has authority in the Church; and indeed, if this is the Apostle John, he certainly would be a senior elder, a senior figure, in the early Church.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he is a pastoral leader, really, we would say today; and one who has the right probably to issue commands, given his special status and authority, but he doesn't. He writes very pastorally; and the other thing that is a little bit different about this, the letter writer is the same as in II John, The Elder, and we add by understanding, the name John; but what is different here is that this letter is addressed to a single individual; somebody named Gaius; and so it begins:

¹The Elder: To my dear friend, Gaius – or my beloved Gaius – whom I love in the truth. So this is very personal; whereas II John was addressed to the whole Church – The Elect Lady – this is addressed to one

person who may have been the pastor of a local congregation, and who, we learn a little bit later on in the letter, was probably one of John's converts because John speaks of him as a child – his child in the faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Beyond that, though, we really do not know much about Gaius. We don't know really who he was. We don't know where he lived. It is kind of a good reminder, Dave, I think sometimes that this is really true of all of the letters of the New Testament, and most of the New Testament is letters – the Epistles; but when we read them we are always reading somebody else's mail, right? This was not addressed to us. Now, that is true of the letter to the Romans, too, but we know a lot more about Rome than we do about Gaius; but nonetheless, as you said, this is somebody near and dear to John's heart. The letter writer loves this person.

DAVE BAST

Well, it is not only somebody else's mail, but it is a one-sided conversation usually; so, there will be issues and incidents that are alluded to in the letter that we would love to know more about, but we just don't. I mean, we can make our best guess; we can sort of piece the evidence together; we can use other references in the New Testament; but in the end, sometimes we have to just say we are not quite sure of the specific situation; but let's get right into it. I already read the opening line. The Elder goes on this way, addressing Gaius:

²Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health, and that all may go well with you, (Sounds like kind of some of our conversations, doesn't it?) even as your soul is getting along well. ³It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. ⁴I have no greater joy than to hear that my children – there is the reference probably to the fact that he was a sort of spiritual father to this person – I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. ⁶They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. ⁷It was for the sake of the name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. ⁸We ought, therefore, to show hospitality to such people, so that we may work together for the truth.

And so, that is the opening few verses of III John. Obviously there is only one chapter, so there are only verses; and as in II John, he puts the word, truth in about every single verse that is here. The major, major theme of John, and in the Gospel of John, too, and in I John, this whole idea of the truth; and the truth is, as we know, and as we will learn from other parts of this letter, the truth is the truth about Jesus, and the truth that He was God's own Son, and the truth – that is the right teaching about Jesus – *orthodoxy* – leads to *orthopraxis*, which is to act in a right way. So, orthodoxy leads to orthopraxis – right teaching leads to right practice; and in Gaius's case, this is an exercise of hospitality. Love – sacrificial love of Jesus – showing itself in hospitality to these people who have come to him and he has taken in. Missionaries perhaps; people who are spreading the Gospel; and Gaius is renowned for his hospitality; it was a spiritual gift.

DAVE BAST

It was, and it is mentioned as a spiritual gift elsewhere in the New Testament; and you might think: Hospitality? Really? You know, that is the same as feeding the hungry or helping to heal the sick? But if you stop and think about it, and try to remember what it must have been like in the first century... You know, we talk about the journeys of Paul – Paul's missionary journeys, and Paul was probably the supreme missionary of the early Church – but there were many others, most of them nameless, who undertook the same sort of work. They would travel throughout the Roman Empire in order to share the Gospel and plant churches in different places; and if you stop and think about it, ask yourself: Where did Paul stay on all these journeys when he is going hundreds of miles; and there weren't Holiday Inn Expresses, you know, at every freeway exit. So, hospitality was an essential part of the missionary undertaking of the Church. It is sort of akin to today when people may not go themselves as missionaries, but they support with their giving those who do. So that is what made what Gaius did so crucially important for the building up of the early Church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And interestingly, the hospitality does have a high profile and we should not downgrade it today either. It is listed as a spiritual gift. Sometimes it is the Greek word, *philoxenia*, which is love of the stranger; but here in III John it is a different word. These are brothers and sisters in the Lord, and so there were two levels of hospitality, both for those whom you already knew were working for the Gospel and for complete strangers as well. So Gaius is steeped in God's love. He is walking in the truth. It shows up in his hospitality, but as this letter goes on, we are going to come to somebody that John is very concerned about because he is a very inhospitable person; and we will think about that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are digging today, Dave, into the shortest letter in the New Testament – the shortest book of the whole Bible – III John. It has been addressed, we just said, to somebody named Gaius, who is marked by walking in the truth, and that walking in the truth leads him to walk in love and to be a very hospitable person in the early Church, but the news here is not all that good.

DAVE BAST

No, and we are going to see the contrast immediately as John goes on to write this: ⁹I wrote to the Church, but Diotrephes... (There is another name, and frankly, another person about whom we do not know anything except from what we deduce from John's remarks about him.) I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. ¹⁰So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us; not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church. ¹¹Dear 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. So, here we have it. All is not well in this little church, and it actually may be more than one church; it may be several house churches, one of them led by Gaius and the other by this fellow, Diotrephes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I have always thought, Dave, it is sort of a glass half-full or glass half-empty thing. We do, in the book of Acts, too... We did a series on Acts here on Groundwork a while back. The Church was never a struggle-free, quarrel-free zone; and that is both good news and bad news. It is bad news in the sense that we could be discouraged. Sin has always found a way to mess up the Church – that is the bad news; but there is a little comfort; some good news to say: But that means that when it happens today, it has always been this way, but God keeps working – the Spirit keeps working. It is not the end of the Church that we have a Diotrephes to deal with. So there is a little comfort to be taken from the fact that the New Testament does not hide the fact that in the earliest, earliest days of the Church there were still struggles, quarrels, and difficult people, and Diotrephes is one of them. We are not quite sure what his problem is, but we can kind of deduce a little bit here.

DAVE BAST

Well, we can see some of it, yes; but I think that is such an important point that you just made, Scott; because in some circles, there is sort of a push to say: Let's go back to the early Church. Let's get back; we can be like them; and the Church has never been pure and clean. Jesus told a parable about wheat and weeds growing together in the same field. He was talking about the Church; and as you pointed out, in the book of Acts you see problems immediately, even in the Jerusalem church. So, yes, I have often said the worst advertisement for the Christian faith is the behavior of the Church. It can also be the best, but it is a mixed bag, and we see that clearly here with this fellow Diotrephes, who seems to have been full of himself, frankly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

“Who loves to be first,” is kind of an interesting phrase in the original Greek; a little unusual. Some have wondered if Diotrephes was trying to be one of the first what would later become known as a bishop or an archbishop, and so some have wondered if III John here is warning against having too much hierarchy in the Church; having, you know, highfalutin offices. I don’t know if that is true or not, but what is clear is, as you just said, Diotrephes is looking out for good old number one. He wants to be at the head of the line. He wants to be boss of this church, or this group of house churches; and what that is leading him to do is the opposite of what we saw in the first segment of this program about Gaius, who welcomes everybody. Diotrephes shuts everybody out; and when people come from even John – as representatives of John – not only does Diotrephes not want to house them or feed them, if anybody else tries to do so, he kicks them out of the church...

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is kind of an ugly picture.

DAVE BAST

He is throwing his weight around, really. He is divisive. He is offensive. He gives the cold shoulder to other Christians – to brothers and sisters in Christ – and he, in doing so, rejects the authority of The Elder – of John himself; the apostolic authority to which he really should be submissive. So, this is a huge problem, and it is the problem of people in leadership who do not behave, who do not walk in the truth. There is that catch phrase that we want to lift up in this program. I think it is also important to note that there is no evidence with Diotrephes of false doctrine, or false teaching.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, not in this case.

DAVE BAST

We see a lot of that in these little New Testament memos; we see a lot of warning against people who are perverting the Christian... truth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We will see it in Jude in the next program.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; but Diotrephes could have been very orthodox in his teaching. It was his conduct that was the problem, and it is a big problem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, it is a big problem because John goes on to write – he is still writing to Gaius – right after he describes Diotrephes’ *inhospitality*, he says: Now do not imitate what is *evil*. He uses the word *evil*, and he is clearly referring to Diotrephes here. So, right, it does not seem to be a failure of orthodoxy on his part. He maybe has his theology right and believes all the right things and says all the right things about Jesus, but he does not show the love of Jesus.

You know, you wonder sometimes how often even today yet when we have controversies in our churches, when we have quarrels among us, again and again and again it is a failure of love. You know, Jesus said in John’s Gospel: A new command I give you: Love one another; which sounds... It is not rocket science... It is not brain surgery... Just love each other. It sounds so easy, but as the earliest history of the Church has shown, and as we continue to prove, unfortunately, constantly in the Church today, that is the hardest commandment of them all.

DAVE BAST

I think of another thing Jesus said with respect to the Church, and those were His words in Mark 10; they occur elsewhere in the other Gospels, too. When He talked about how the gentiles – the great people in the world – like to lord it over one another; but He says to His disciples: It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great must be the servant of all. That is exactly the point at which Diotrephes is failing. He is lording it over others; he is not humbling himself. It is not just love, but it is love in humility; and wherever you see a leader, frankly, in a church – a pastor or other leader who is pushing other people around – and who does not have that mark of humility, that is a danger sign, and it has nothing to do with whether they are a great preacher or whether their doctrine all lines up and every T is crossed, you know. So, beware of people like this. John points it out. He does not pull any punches.

SCOTT HOEZEE

My way or the highway in the church. My style of music; my style of preaching; my style of worship; programs run the way I want to do them. Well, that is our loving to be first and our wanting to be at the head of the line; and it ruins the fellowship, as you just said, Dave, every time. It ruins the fellowship and it ruins the Church just as surely as heresy – false teaching – would do.

DAVE BAST

Yes; right. Well, we want to explore a little bit more deeply that wonderful phrase: Walking in the truth; and try to think about maybe what that means for us as individuals and as a Church today. So when we conclude our look at III John that is what we will take up in just a bit.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork; and today we are listening to the words of III John, and let's now just get the concluding verses from this letter. This begins at verse 12; having just written about Diotrephes, who is a very boastful, proud person who has been shoving people around, now John concludes by turning to a better person again, and he writes in verse 12:

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. ¹³I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. ¹⁴I 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.

DAVE BAST

Beautiful. So here is a third person whom we do not know, Demetrius; but now the pendulum swings back to the positive because John can testify to him that the universal testimony about him is true, and he adds a curious phrase when he says that even the truth itself seems to affirm Demetrius' good Christian character.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is spoken well of by everyone, even by the truth itself; so, the truth – the truth is speaking well of Demetrius. Almost nobody knows what this means. If you look at the commentaries, there are a lot of different opinions. Some people think it is a personification of the truth. You could almost spell it with a capital T, and so, is that like Jesus? Did Jesus or the Holy Spirit give John a special revelation specifically about Demetrius and say to John in a vision: I like him. I speak well of him, too. Some people think that. Others think it is just an expression – a way of speaking back then. The truth itself affirms that he is, you know... Sort of like today saying: Oh, Demetrius is true-blue. Well, that would not make sense to a lot of people, saying: What does blue have to do with it? But we know what we mean when we say someone is true-blue; so it is possible that back in that day when they say the truth itself speaks well of him, it was just a phrase to affirm someone's goodness.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it could be; but perhaps the takeaway for us is here is that word *truth* again, that has cropped up over and over and over, both positively and negatively; there are those who walk in the truth; there are those who don't; you know, which one do you want to be? Well, that is a great question that I think John would pose to each of us; and as I think of what is really a metaphor: Walking in the truth – what does that suggest? What does it actually mean when we come to apply it to our lives? It seems to me that on the one hand it implies progress; that you do not just sort of stand pat on what you believe or know to be true; that you continue to walk in it; that you go deeper, maybe, in a sense; that you never close yourself off to learning more of the truth. You think of the scriptures, which we believe to be God's truth. We continue to go deeper into them. There is always more to read; there is always more to apply to our lives; there is always more to see and understand.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I like the phrase you mentioned, you know, the image of a journey; because again, a throwback perhaps to the Gospel of John, where Jesus in the upper room dialogues in John 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17, where Jesus said: The Holy Spirit will lead you into all truth; and the verb that He used there in John was a continual leading. It is not like we are going to give you the truth all packaged up and you are going to get it once and that is it. No, the Church is going to continue to mature; individual believers are going to continue to mature. It is a lifelong – and for the Church, history-long process of keeping step with the Spirit, as Paul wrote in Galatians. So there is that interesting idea that you continue to grow in your love. Based on what was written about Gaius earlier in III John, we would say that walking in the truth involves being loving and hospitable and open to all people; and we keep learning that as we go through life, and as we interact with our sisters and brothers in the Church, but even those from outside.

DAVE BAST

I am glad you have come back to that idea of love – of walking in the love as well as walking in truth, because that is a theme in the Johannine epistles. Love as the New Testament understands it is primarily an action not a feeling. It is not an emotion. So, the other thing that this metaphor of walking suggests is that it is something you do. It has to do with your conduct. It is not just something on the inside that you kind of feel or possess; so it is very much oriented to the way you treat people. Do you welcome them? I am also impressed, in this little letter, as in so many of the other New Testament epistles, about how relational the Christian faith is. It is really about being one with other people and being brought together into this new fellowship – this body of Christ – this thing that God is doing in the world where He is reconciling folks from different races and different cultures and languages. So John says at the end: Hey, greet the friends there by name...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is lovely.

DAVE BAST

The Church ought to be a place where we know each other's names; and again, that is what points out the really bad actions of a Diotrephes, who is pushing people away and shoving them out rather than welcoming and embracing them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as you said earlier, Dave, we often think of that love as just a feeling; especially romantic love and so forth; and of course, you cannot order love. You cannot say to somebody: Love me. You cannot order someone to have romantic feelings. You can, however, order people to act lovingly in the relational sense you were just talking about; and as C. S. Lewis famously wrote: Very often, though, in the Church if you act lovingly toward someone long enough your feelings will often follow.

The main thing is that we do the right thing – that we become a servant of missionaries, of people who visit us, people who come to us – we are their servant. We do not want to be like Diotrephes who loves to be first.

We want to go to the back of the line so that we can serve all people.

DAVE BAST

Well, here it is, then; this little scrap of a memo that we call III John, and it is in our Bible. Now admittedly – full disclosure – it was one of the last pieces of the Bible to be accepted by the whole Church. It was questioned for a time. People wondered about it because it is seemingly so small and insignificant; but really, when we dig into it, we find it is not; that it has wonderful lessons for us all as followers of Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you dig deeper into the scriptures. So visit our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/recognize-and-imitate-good>

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