

“We Ought to Support People Like These” (3 John)

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Engage with me, if you will, in a little thought experiment. Imagine that tonight there’s a knock on your door (or a ring on your doorbell). Let’s say it’s right before dinner. You open the door and you see a stranger. He says he’s in town on business but doesn’t have a hotel to stay in. He says he had booked a hotel but when he got there, he was told he didn’t have a reservation, and all the local hotels and motels have no vacancies. He doesn’t know anyone in town. So, he figured he would ask a stranger if he could stay in their home for the night. And he’s hungry. Do you have anything to eat? Would you take him in?

Now, let’s say there’s a knock on the door and it’s someone famous. Let’s say it’s Larry Bird. He’s on a cross-country trip and he has just realized he’s lost his wallet. He doesn’t have any cash or credit cards with him. He just needs to stay with you for one night until he can figure out what happened to his wallet or how he can replace his credit cards and driver’s license. Would you let him stay with you?

Now imagine that there’s a knock on the door and it’s a stranger. This time, it’s a poor-looking man, but he says he’s a minister of the gospel. He’s going around doing preaching, in parks and in malls and other public places. He heard that you were a Christian and he needs a place to stay. Would you take him in?

If we’re being honest, I bet only a few of us would allow the first or third person in our homes. But most of us, if not all of us, would allow Larry Bird to stay with us. Why is that? Is it because we really know him? Do we have a relationship with him? No. But he’s a celebrity, a Boston legend. And maybe we think we know enough about his character to trust that he wouldn’t hurt us or steal something from us. After all, he has a reputation to maintain. We’re not so sure about the other two people, even the one who claims to be a Christian and a preacher. Why do we show hospitality to some people and not others? Maybe we would let the Hick from French Lick in our homes simply because we love sports and celebrities so much.

Now, let’s think of another scenario. Imagine you see something online, one of those GoFundMe pages requesting help for some kind of financial crisis. Perhaps it’s a friend who has had unexpected medical expenses. Then, you see another online request for help, perhaps from a Christian organization or an individual needing money for a particular endeavor, such as

translating the Bible into a language that doesn't have a Bible translation yet, or for a mission trip of some sort. Then—and let's imagine this an election year—you see some solicitation for a campaign. If only you give a certain amount, you can help your candidate win. (Or maybe it's something else; last weekend, I saw one of those heartbreaking ads for the ASPCA, the ones that show abandoned and sheltered animals, and requesting funds to take care of them.) If you saw those three options, and could only choose to give to one, which would it be—the friend, the ministry, or the politician (or the abandoned animals)?

Why do we support certain people and certain causes and not others? I suppose we support what we think is most valuable or what we love the most. And that leads me to broader questions: What do we value most? What do we really care about? What do we get excited about? What do we support with our time, our emotions, our efforts, and our money?

Today, we're going to see that supporting the ministry of the gospel is a good thing. We'll also see that failing to support the ministry of the gospel is an evil thing.

We were going to look at 2 John this morning, but I decided to rearrange the schedule. We'll look at 2 John next week. The reason we're considering 3 John this week and not next week is because we have missionaries with us today. We began supporting them this year and they are soon going to head overseas to begin their work. And I thought it would be fitting to look at a letter that discusses supporting traveling Christians who are going out “for the sake of the name” of Jesus.

Third John is the shortest book of the whole Bible (by word count). The fact that this book and 2 John are short doesn't mean they're not important. One commentator I've been reading each week is named Robert Yarbrough. He says, “To this day, most churches could function a whole lifetime without 2 John or 3 John in their Bibles and never miss their absence.”¹ That's a shame. That's why I wanted to spend a week on each of these books.

I'm going to read the whole of 3 John, but before I do that, I want to give us a sense of what this letter is about. This letter is written by the apostle John.² It was written to a man named

¹ Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 7.

² There are some who doubt that the apostle John wrote the Gospel and the three letters that bear the name “John.” They believe that there could be different “Johns” who wrote these works. But the language and themes of these works are so similar that they must be written by the same author. First John was written by an eyewitness to Jesus (1 John 1:1–4). It would seem that an apostle wrote 1, 2, and 3 John and external evidence in the early church overwhelmingly points to Johannine authorship.

Gaius, another Christian. We don't know much of anything about Gaius except that John loves him and that he is a faithful Christian. He showed hospitality to traveling Christians, who were missionaries or itinerant preachers. John commends Gaius for this and encourages him to "send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God" (v. 6). John also wrote this letter to bring up the negative example of a man named Diotrephes. This man had rejected the authority of John, he put himself first, he gossiped, and he refused to show hospitality to missionaries. In fact, he tried to put people out of the church who showed such hospitality to these traveling Christians. It's clear that John thinks Diotrephes is wrong. We might say he's the opposite of Gaius.

John also wrote this letter to commend a man named Demetrius to Gaius. Demetrius might have been the one carrying this letter. John wants Gaius to show hospitality to Demetrius.

Finally, John indicates that there's more he wants to say to Gaius, but he hopes to say the rest in person.

So, that's what the letter is about. Now, let's read the whole letter. And after I do that, I want to make four points. Here is 3 John:

¹ The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

² Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. ³ For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

⁵ Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, ⁶ who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. ⁷ For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.

⁸ Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

⁹ I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. ¹² Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.

¹³ I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. ¹⁴ I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

¹⁵ Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name.³

The first thing I want us to see in this passage is the relationship between love and truth. Love and truth go together. Some people think they are opposed to one another, or the opposite of one another. But according to the Bible, you can't really love someone without the truth, and you can't be a person of the truth without love. Look at the first verse. John identifies himself simply as an elder, a leader in the church. And he says that he loves Gaius in the truth. He doesn't mean, "I truly love you, Gaius." I'm sure John truly loved Gaius. But the reason he loves Gaius is because he is "in the truth." Jesus himself is the truth (John 14:6). Both John and Gaius were "in Jesus," which means they had a relationship with him. They were united to Jesus by the bonds of faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. Gaius was a brother in Christ to John. Some people reported to John that Gaius was walking in the truth, which means that Gaius was living a life that a Christian should live. He was walking with integrity. He knew the truth about *the* Truth, Jesus, and he lived like it. This news about Gaius thrilled John, who said that he had no greater joy than to find that his disciples, whom he calls "children," were walking in the truth.

John's love for Gaius is expressed in the fact that he prays for Gaius. He prays for his health and his soul. The Christian should be concerned about the whole life, not just the soul or spirit, but also the body and the mind. John cares for Gaius's whole life. John loves Gaius so much that he writes to him a message of truth. John also expresses his love for Gaius by stating his desire to come visit him soon.

Gaius, for his part, shows his love for Christians by supporting gospel ministers. The people he supported were probably some kind of early missionaries. They didn't have formal support structures. It's not like the early church developed missions agencies. It's not like the early church had a lot of money. People who were missionaries relied upon the hospitality of others to have a place to stay, and to have sustenance. They relied on others Christians to take them into their homes. It seems that Gaius was doing this. He surely did this because he loved the truth. Not only did he love other Christians, he loved the gospel, the message concerning Jesus. He must have believed that the truth about Jesus was so important that it was imperative that he supported those who wanted to tell others this message.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

On the other hand, Diotrephes seems to be lacking in both love and truth. We really don't know much about this man. But what John reveals about Diotrephes is telling. First, Diotrephes put himself first. This is not the way of Jesus. When Jesus was asked who would be honored in the kingdom of God, he said, "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26–28). Jesus, the Son of Man, came not to be served, but to serve. He came to give his life so that those who trust him would live. He didn't come to take. No, he came to give and give and give. He came to serve. And in the kingdom of God, "the last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16).

Second, Diotrephes also rejected the authority of the apostles, particularly John. Third, he talked "wicked nonsense" against John. Fourth, he refused to show hospitality to other gospel ministers. Fifth, he opposed people who supported these ministers. Why would someone act this way? Probably pride. Diotrephes wanted people in his church to look up to him, not John or these missionaries. He might have been jealous of these other ministers. Perhaps it was also a financial issue. He didn't want the people of his church giving money that they could give him to others. Whatever his exact issue was, his attitude is that of someone who doesn't care above all for God and his glory. He cared about his own glory. If he really cared about the gospel, he would live as a servant. He wouldn't deny the authority of an apostle. He wouldn't hinder those who tried to share the gospel with others. If he really loved the truth, he would do everything to support the proclamation of that truth. He wouldn't get in its way.

If you love God, you will love other children of God. You will love other people made in his image. And you will love God truly, in the truth. You will love who he is and what he has done for you. You will love the good news that God sent his Son to die for sinners, to bear the punishment that they deserve, so that all who come to Jesus and trust him for salvation won't be condemned. This is the best news. We deserve hell and God has given us heaven. We deserve to be cast out of God's presence forever, and he sent his Son to embrace us and gather us back to our Maker. God could have abandoned his creation, because we have all turned our backs on God and failed to live for him. But he loves us so much that he made a way to be right with him and he promises to refashion his creation into a paradise. If you really love God, you would support this news, not get in the way of it.

That leads me to my second point: To support gospel ministry is good and to hinder it is evil. Look at verse 11: “Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” Now, if we took that verse out of context, we might think John is saying something generic about doing good and not evil. There are certainly other verses in the Bible that talk about forsaking evil and doing good.⁴ But in the context of this letter, John seems to have something more specific in mind. Diotrophes is being evil. John doesn’t want Gaius to imitate that man. Instead, he should continue doing good.

Does it seem extreme that not supporting gospel ministry would be called evil? Well, first, let’s consider what Jesus says about the issue. In John 13:20, he says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” In other words, to have God the Father, we need to receive God the Son, Jesus. And to have a relationship with Jesus, we need to receive those sent by Jesus. That means receiving the message of the apostles, passed on through preachers, evangelists, and missionaries. And the opposite is true: those who reject Jesus’ messengers reject Jesus and will receive judgment.

To see that, we must look at a couple of passages in the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 10, Jesus sends out his apostles to tell “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” this message: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 10:6–7). Jesus gives the apostles the following instructions:

⁹ Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, ¹⁰ no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. ¹¹ And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. ¹² As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³ And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴ And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town (Matt. 10:9–15).

First, Jesus says they are to go out relying completely on the kindness of strangers. They are not supposed to bring money or a bag. It’s clear that those to whom they bring this message should provide for their needs (“for the laborer deserves his food”). Second, if a house greets the apostles in a worthy manner, then that household will receive peace. But if people reject the

⁴ Ps. 34:14; 37:27; Isa. 1:16–17.

apostles' words, Jesus tells them to move on. And, third, he gives a chilling warning: their judgment will be worse than the judgment given to Sodom and Gomorrah. In case you don't know, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by sulfur and fire (Gen. 19:24) because of their sin, which included sexual immorality (Jude 7), pride, and greed (Ezek. 16:49). Jesus is saying, in other words, that judgment will come to those who refuse to listen to his messengers.

Later in that same chapter, Matthew 10, Jesus tell his disciples this:

⁴⁰“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. ⁴¹The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴²And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (Matt. 10:40–42).

Again, Jesus says that those who receive his messengers receive him, and whoever receives him receives God. Whoever helps “these little ones,” Jesus disciples, even with a cup of cold water, will not lose his reward.

Later in Matthew, there's another passage that touches on this same theme. It's often a very misunderstood passage because people don't pay attention to its language carefully. It's Matthew 25:31–46:

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

⁴¹“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you

did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Many people think that this is a judgment based on works, on how we treat the poor and the down and out. Well, it is a picture of Judgment Day. There is Jesus, on the throne, and everyone from all the nations will appear before him. He will separate the people into two groups: the sheep, who are his people, and who will inherit the kingdom, and the goats, who have failed to do what is right, are cast out into eternal punishment. But the Bible is clear that no one can survive God’s judgment based on works, because all of us fail to do good all the time. We are saved from condemnation not by works, but by God’s grace, which is received by faith in Jesus and his works.

I can’t tell you how often I see people assume that “the least of these” is a reference to the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. But if we look carefully, we see two things. One, Jesus says “the least of these *my brothers*.” This isn’t a general reference to the downtrodden. No, these are Jesus’ brothers. Normally, that would mean Christians, people who have God as their Father and Jesus as their brother. And then there’s the reference to “the least one these,” which we saw in Matthew 10:42 was a clear reference to the disciples. Jesus’ point in this passage is that people who receive gospel ministers—whether the disciples or those who carry the apostles’ message—receive Jesus. They are his people, his sheep. The ones who provided for the physical needs of these gospel messengers, even the ones in prison, are ultimately caring for Jesus. The ones who reject Jesus’ messengers reject Jesus.⁵

If we were judged on our works, whether we always cared for the poor, I think you and I know how we would fare. We would be cast out into outer darkness, into eternal punishment. But if we have received the gospel message and have acted in line with the gospel message, even by caring for the ones who spread the gospel, the good news that sinners are reconciled to God through Christ, then we are Jesus’ people and we will live with him forever.

The reason people are condemned for rejecting Jesus’ gospel preachers, evangelists, and missionaries isn’t because those people are so great. It’s because they carry a message that is

⁵ Denny Burk has two articles on his blog that indicate that this view is the correct one and has been held by the majority of Christian commentators throughout the ages. See “The ‘least of these’ are not the poor but the Christian baker, photographer, and florist,” May 13, 2015, <http://www.dennyburk.com/the-least-of-these-are-not-the-poor-but-the-christian-baker-photographer-and-florist>; and “The predominant view of ‘the least of these’ in church history,” May 18, 2015, <http://www.dennyburk.com/the-least-of-these-are-not-the-poor-but-the-christian-baker-photographer-and-florist>.

priceless. It's because they're ambassadors of the King. They go out "for the sake of the name" of Jesus. They share the gospel, the very best news. And receiving the gospel message is the only way any human being can be reconciled to God, forgiven of all wrongdoing, and have the promise of life without end. There is no other news so good, so precious, so vital. All the news that we get so worked up about, whether it's the latest tragedy, some political story, the latest celebrity gossip, or what's happening in sports, pales in comparison. Those little bits of news are nothing. They are a mist, here today and gone tomorrow. They are like little flames that are extinguished quickly, whereas the gospel is like the sun, which endures, is powerful, gives life, is the very center of our solar system, and burns brightly even when it's not seen.

This message is so important that it not only has to be believed, but it also needs to be supported. Things may look a bit different these days. We generally don't have to take missionaries or traveling preachers into our homes. But these people do need money. They need our prayers. They need support. Failure to support them is a failure to support Jesus. Diotrophes put his pride above the gospel. He cared more about his position and place in the church than he cared about the fame of Jesus and the salvation of those who would hear about him. That is evil. And so is indifference to the gospel.

Here's a third thing I want us to see in this passage, something a little less obvious. Gospel ministry isn't cost-effective. We get a hint of this in verses 13 and 14, where John says, "I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face." There are some things that need to be shared face to face. Ministry is interpersonal. We can't just send people books or a link to a website. Yes, printed materials and digital materials are very helpful. They are indispensable tools. But they're tools, and tools need people to use them. Gospel conversations need to be face to face. Ministry is often done face to face. People pour out their guts, confess their sins, grow in understanding and faith in interpersonal settings, often one on one. Also, ministry is slow-moving, unpredictable, and messy.

What this means is that ministry requires a lot of money. And it requires time. It requires investment. We should think of supporting our missionaries as a long investment. We should think of investing them as people, not just investing in their ministry this year, but in their ministries for the rest of their lives. I think the last church I served invested heavily in me. They paid for my seminary tuition, fees, and books. They allowed me time to study. They allowed me

to grow as a Christian and as a pastor. I don't think they did that simply for what I could give them, as if I were their hired hand. They invested in me "for the sake of the name" of Jesus.

All of us should consider personally investing in gospel ministry. When we make friends with non-Christians and love them, it may take a while to get to the point when you can tell them the gospel. That's particularly true in New England. But it's worth it. Gospel ministry is unpredictable. It's slow. It's messy. It requires a lot of face-to-face conversations. It requires investment. John invested in the churches he served. He invested in Gaius and Demetrius. After all, he's essentially vouching for Demetrius here.

Here's my fourth and final point. Do we treasure the gospel the way that John and Gaius did? Do we pour ourselves into the support of the ministry of the gospel? Do we give generously to our local church? Do we give to organizations like Wycliffe Bible Translators? Do we give to organizations that support evangelism, such as ministries that focus on college campuses? Do we support missionaries and missionary organizations?

Last week, I was in Florida, attending a conference for pastors. One of the pastors asked us if we truly treasured Christ. He asked if we see and know the all-surpassing worth of Christ. Do you see how great Jesus is? He was sent by the Father from the safe, glorious home of heaven to a world that is sometimes ugly and dangerous. He came to preach the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand, that people could turn to God and be forgiven of their sins. And he not only preached that message. He died to make that forgiveness possible. Jesus didn't just talk the talk. He walked the walk, all the way to the cross. He gave everything so the gospel could be a reality. Do we understand his sacrifice? Do we understand the importance of the gospel? Do we understand that without it, no one would know God and that everyone would be condemned? Do we understand that there are many in this world who have yet to hear the gospel? Do we care?

If we care, we shouldn't hinder the gospel. Diotrophes let his pride, his pettiness, and his poor attitude get in the way of the gospel. We hinder the gospel ministry even at this church if we're proud, if we gossip, if we insist on our personal preferences and our cherished little traditions, instead of focusing on the gospel. A lot of churches focus on their traditions, their programs, their personal preferences, their entertainment, and their feel-good environment, and not on the gospel. We can't do that, not if we treasure the gospel, not if we know its worth.

If we treasure the gospel, we should personally support the ministry of the gospel. I hope that you would prepare yourself to share the gospel by praying and studying and seeking opportunities. But I know that not all of us are particularly gifted in the area of evangelism. Yet all of us can partner in the work of the gospel. John says, in verse 8, that “we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.” Those who support missionaries and gospel ministers are “fellow workers for the truth.”

I don't know who gives how much to his church. I hope you give generously. This church has a gospel ministry. Also, as a church, we give 20 percent of undesignated offerings to missions. Some churches give less; some give a lot more. But we do give and I hope that we could find a way to give more to the missionaries we have here today with us. You can give directly to other organizations that support the proclamation of the gospel. And you can pray. Not all of us have riches, but all of us can speak to God. All of us can walk in the truth, using whatever resources God has given us.

Let us treasure the eternal, infinite value of the gospel. Let's treasure the all-surpassing greatness of Jesus, who makes the gospel a reality. Without Jesus, there is no good news. Period. If we love Jesus, we'll love the truth. We won't hinder it through our pride or pettiness or gossip or insistence on having our way. We'll humbly, gladly, and generously serve our King by supporting his messengers.