

# GOD WITH US

## Part 11: LATER LETTERS

### Message 13 – 2 & 3 John Walking in the Truth

#### Introduction

Second and Third John are like a modern postcard, as they are very short letters that would have fit on a single sheet of papyrus. They were written to people that John was hoping to visit in the near future, thus his remark at the end of each that he did not wish to write more “with pen and paper,” but hoped to come for a “face to face” visit. While 2John is addressed to “*the chosen lady*,” this is likely a reference to the church in a certain city. (It makes little sense that John would address this letter to one specific woman and her biological “children” and end with greetings from the “children” of her “chosen sister.” These are probably metaphors for churches and the believers who comprise their membership.) 3John is addressed to Gaius, who was a leader in a local church (equivalent to a modern day “pastor”). Both letters continue a theme from 1John, namely the need for believers to “walk in truth” amidst heresies that were threatening the churches. We will take a thematic approach in our study of these two short letters.

#### Walking in Truth

Both letters highlight the theme of “walking in truth.” Both open with greetings that repeatedly use the word “truth.”

***“The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth, for the sake of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever: Grace, mercy and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment to do from the Father” (2John 1-4).***

There are 5 references to truth in these opening lines. John’s joy is tied to the fact that these spiritual children were “*walking in truth.*” The opening verses of 3John, addressed to a different church/leader, sound the same theme:

***“The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I***

***pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers. For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth” (3John 1-4).***

The problem then (and now) is that Satan is the enemy of truth, and he has his agents in this world (false teachers) who will seek to lead people away from God’s truth. John warns about these enemies of truth, and their potential impact even on God’s children:

***“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son” (2John 7-9).***

In John’s day, the problem was *competing truth claims*. While that same problem exists today, we face a deeper challenge, and that is *opposition to the very idea of truth*. As our friend Abdu Murray has written, we live in a *post-truth* culture. Previously, we lived in a “post-modern” culture that said *truth is relative* to each person. You have your truth and I have my truth, and both are valid because “truth” is a personal issue. Now, however, the culture has moved a step further from truth. Instead of truth being *relative*, truth is *irrelevant*. It simply does not matter. It is not worth debating various truth claims as if there were a real set of objective truths. While previously we could say that our anchor had broken free from the bottom and we were drifting, pulling the anchor along, now the anchor has been cut away completely. We are drifting in a post-truth culture, with no clear guidance or destination.

*“I have no greater joy than to hear of my children walking in the truth” (3Jn.4). How are you helping those who follow you to learn and live in God’s truth? Are you walking in truth yourself, giving them an example to follow? Are you growing in your grasp on truth, showing them how important it is to you? Are you seeking to speak truth into their lives, when given the opportunity to do so? For “children” (spiritual or biological) to “walk in truth,” they need “parents” to point the way, as John did for his spiritual children.*

## Supporting the Truth

Along with walking in truth, 2 & 3 John have a unique emphasis on supporting those who advocate for truth. Christians can support such truth-tellers by various means, using their homes to show hospitality to visiting Christian teachers and missionaries, and using their financial and material resources to support such truth-tellers as they go out into the world advocating for the truth of God's Word.

In 3John, there is specific instruction concerning the support of traveling teachers or "missionaries."

***"Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore, we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth" (3Jn.5-8).***

Hospitality was an important gift that the early Christians could give to visiting teachers and apostles. The "hotels" (inns) were notoriously dirty and unsafe, as well as posing moral temptations. By opening up their homes to these "strangers" the early Christians were proving to be "*fellow workers with the truth*" (3Jn.8). Additionally, they could supply financial support for the missionaries as they went on their way to the next assignment. These missionaries had gone out to spread the Name of Jesus to their world, having accepted no financial support from "the Gentiles" (here, meaning "non-believers"). Thus, it was the duty of members of the early Christian churches to provide support for these workers.

*We see here the beginnings of the idea of a "missions department" in a local church – a group of people appointed to discern the reputation of incoming missionaries, and to help the church properly allocate its financial resources to support them. In John's day, leaders/teachers in each church would have been responsible to verify the credentials of visiting missionaries, and then to invite the congregants to help in the support and encouragement of them. If you are interested in being more involved in Missions at OPC, contact our Missions Pastor, Brent, to learn how you can get more involved.*

On the other hand, to show hospitality to false teachers was a different matter, as 2John makes clear:

***“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds” (2Jn.10,11).***

This warning about “receiving false teachers into your house” is *not prohibiting* conversations we might have in our homes with those who believe or teach ideas contrary to Christian beliefs. It is warning against *housing and supporting* such teachers so as to *participate in the spread* of their false teachings.

*If a missionary from another religion shows up on your doorstep, you are not violating the intent of John’s instruction if you invite them in for a conversation with the intent of presenting the truth about Jesus to them. You would be violating John’s instruction if you invited them to stay with you for a week as they continued their work in your neighborhood, as you met their physical and financial needs during their stay . . . and then sent them on their way with a generous financial gift to aid their future work.*

### **Imitating the Truth**

3John focuses on a specific problem involving an influential but dangerous leader in a local church. Diotrephes was a proud man (loving to be ‘first’) who rejected godly outside teachers when they came to town, even going so far as to excommunicate those believers who did welcome the visiting teachers. He rejected the admonitions of the apostle John, who was regarded as the bishop of the churches in Asia Minor, even bringing false accusations against John. Thus, John issues a strong warning to NOT follow the example of this man.

***“I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God” (3Jn.9-11).***

Who, then, should the believers in this local church trust as their leader? John points them to Demetrius, who had an excellent reputation among the community of believers. John highly commends Demetrius to them as an example to follow.

***“Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true” (3Jn.12).***

Many of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Gentile Christians had names that reflected their upbringing in homes where the Greek gods and goddesses were worshipped. Demetrius’ name is derived from the Greek goddess Demeter. “Devoted to Demeter” was the literal meaning of his name. At some point, Demetrius was introduced to the message of Christ and became a believer. What a testimony of the power of Christ to take a child dedicated to Demeter and transform him into a man who became an example of Christian devotion for others to imitate. (Similarly, the name Diotrophes means “nourished by Jupiter.”)

*Who do you follow? Who do you seek to pattern your life after? One of the most important things you can do is to determine who your mentors are, and then seek to learn everything you can from them. Much of the Christian life is learning by watching, not just learning by listening. Find a good, godly role model, then follow closely in their footsteps.*

### **Face to face**

John had many things to say to both recipients of these letters; but he much preferred to communicate with them in person.

***“Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that your joy may be made full” (2Jn.12).***

***“I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face” (3Jn.13,14).***

For John, JOY was something that he found in loving relationships with fellow believers, as together they sought to walk in fellowship with God and with one another.

*Today, believers are more isolated from one another than ever. Even when “church” is operating “normally,” many people lack the relational connectedness that is necessary for healthy spiritual formation. People are often more ‘connected’ to their devices rather than to real people (face to face). As Cloud and Townsend concluded in their book, *How People Grow*, growth happens according to this formula: GRACE + TRUTH + TIME + RELATIONAL CONTEXTS. We each need the truth of God’s Word spoken into our hearts and minds. But this truth needs to come wrapped in the grace, mercy and gentleness of God’s love, expressed through people. Then, we need time to appropriate and engage with God’s truth. Change does not happen overnight. Finally, all of this needs to happen in relational contexts where we are truly connected to other people. Another pair of authors make the same point in a different way (from the perspective of brain science). Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church*, argue that the relational side of the brain needs to lead the way in spiritual formation, even as the informational side continues to appropriate and assess new truth. They have concluded that the relational connections that we make will actually determine our ability to live out the truths of God’s life-changing Word. This is why Jesus said: If you LOVE ME, you will OBEY ME. Love (relationship) precedes obedience (conforming to a set of truths). Thus, the critical connection in terms of spiritual formation is this: WHO are you deeply connected to in love-filled, joy-giving relationships?*

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Discuss the challenges of living as a Christian in a “post-truth culture.” How are you seeing this play out in your own life?
2. Read through and discuss the last box above, on the importance of relational connectedness for spiritual formation. Note how that also ties in with John’s emphasis on “Imitating the Truth” (i.e., finding people you can pattern your life after).
3. What is your biggest takeaway from the 3 letters of John?