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Preface

An Exposition, With Practical Observations, of The Third Epistle of John

Christian communion is exerted and cherished by letter. Christians are to be commended in the practical proof of their professed subjection to the gospel of Christ. The animating and countenancing of generous and public-spirited persons is doing good to many—to this end the apostle sends this encouraging epistle to his friend Gaius, in which also he complains of the quite opposite spirit and practice of a certain minister, and confirms the good report concerning another more worthy to be imitated.

Chapter 1

In this epistle the apostle congratulates Gaius upon the prosperity of his soul (v. 1, 2), upon the fame he had among good Christians (v. 3, 4), and upon his charity and hospitality to the servants of Christ (v. 5, 6). He complains of contemptuous treatment by an ambitious Diotrephes (v. 9, 10), recommends Demetrius (v. 12), and expresses his hope of visiting Gaius shortly (v. 13, 14).

Verses 1-2

Here we see, I. The sacred penman who writes and sends the letter; not here indeed notified by his name, but a more general character: *The elder*, he that is so by years and by office; honour and deference are due to both. Some have questioned whether this were John the apostle or no; but his style and spirit seem to shine in the epistle. Those that are beloved of Christ will love the brethren for his sake. Gaius could not question from whom the letter came. The apostle might have assumed many more illustrious characters, but it becomes not Christ's ministers to affect swelling pompous titles. He almost levels himself with the more ordinary pastors of the church, while he styles himself the elder. Or, possibly, most of the extraordinary ministers, the apostles, were now dead, and this holy survivor would countenance the continued standing ministry, by assuming the more common title—the elder. *The elders I exhort, who am also an elder*, 1 Pt. 5:1.

II. The person saluted and honoured by the letter. The former is directed to an elect lady, this to a choice gentleman; such are worthy of esteem and value. He is notified, 1. By his name,—*Gaius*. We read of several of that name, particularly of one whom the apostle Paul baptized at Corinth, who possibly might be also the apostle's host and kind entertainer there (Rom. 16:23); if this be not he, it is his brother in name, estate, and disposition. Then, 2. By the kind expressions of the apostle to him: *The well-beloved*, and *whom I love in the truth*. Love expressed is wont to kindle love. Here seems to be either the sincerity of the apostle's love or the religion of it. The sincerity of it: *Whom I love in the truth*, for the truth's sake, as abiding and walking in the truth as it is in Jesus. To love our friends for the truth's sake is true love, religious gospel love.

III. The salutation or greeting, containing a prayer, introduced by an affectionate compellation—*Beloved*, thou beloved one in Christ. The minister who would gain love must show it himself. Here is, 1. The apostle's good opinion of his friend, that his *soul prospered*. There is such a thing as soul-prosperity—the greatest blessing on this side heaven. This supposes regeneration, and an inward fund of spiritual life; this stock is increasing, and, while spiritual treasures are advancing, the soul is in a fair way to the kingdom of glory. 2. His good wish for his friend that his body may *prosper and be in health* as well as his soul. Grace and health are two rich companions; grace will improve health, health will employ grace. It frequently falls out that a rich soul is lodged in a crazy body; grace must be exercised in submission to such a dispensation; but we may well wish and pray that those who have prosperous souls may have healthful bodies too; their grace will shine in a larger sphere of activity.

Verses 3-8

In these verses we have,

I. The good report that the apostle had received concerning this friend of his: *The brethren came and testified of the truth that*

is in thee (v. 3), *who have borne witness of thy charity before the church*, v. 6. Here we may see, 1. The testimony or thing testified concerning Gaius—the truth that was in him, the reality of his faith, the sincerity of his religion, and his devotedness to God; and this evinced by his charity, which includes his love to the brethren, kindness to the poor, hospitality to Christian strangers, and readiness to accommodate them for the service of the gospel. Faith should work by love; it gives a lustre in and by the offices of love, and induces others to commend its integrity. 2. The witnesses-brethren that came from Gaius testified and bore witness. A good report is due from those who have received good; though a good name is but a small reward for costly service, yet it is *better than precious ointment*, and will not be refused by the ingenuous and religious. 3. The auditory or judicatory before which the report and testimony were given—*before the church*. This seems to be the church at which the apostle now resided. What church this was we are not sure; what occasion they had thus to testify his faith and love before the church we cannot tell; possibly out of the fulness of the heart the mouth spoke; they could not but testify what they found and felt; possibly they would engage the church's prayer for the continued life and usefulness of such a patron, that he might *prosper and be in health as his soul prospered*.

II. The report the apostle himself gives of him, introduced by an endearing appellation again: *Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers*, v. 5. 1. He was hospitable, good to the brethren, even to strangers; it was enough to recommend them to Gaius's house that they belonged to Christ. Or he was good to *the brethren* of the same church with himself, and to those who came from far; all who were of the household of faith were welcome to him. 2. He seems to have been of a catholic spirit; he could overlook the petty differences among serious Christians, and be communicative to all who bore the image and did the work of Christ. And, 3. He was conscientious in what he did: "*Thou doest faithfully* (thou makest faithful work of) *whatsoever thou doest*; thou doest it as a faithful servant, and from the Lord Christ mayest thou expect the reward of the inheritance." Such faithful souls can hear their own praises without being puffed up; the commendation of what is good in us is designed, not for our pride, but for our encouragement to continue therein, and should be accordingly improved.

III. The apostle's joy therein, in the good report itself, and the good ground of it: *I rejoiced greatly when the brethren came and testified*, etc., v. 3. *I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in the truth*, in the precepts of the Christian religion. The best evidence of our having the truth is our *walking in the truth*. Good men will greatly rejoice in the soul-prosperity of others; and they are glad to hear of the grace and goodness of others. *They glorified God in me*. Love envieth not, but rejoiceth in the good name of other folks. As it is joy to good parents, it will be joy to good ministers, to see their children evidence their sincerity in religion, and adorn their profession.

IV. The direction the apostle gives his friend concerning further treatment of the brethren that were with him: *Whom if thou bring forward on their journey, after a godly sort, thou shalt do well*. It seems to have been customary in those days of love to attend travelling ministers and Christians, at least some part of their road, 1 Co. 16:6. It is a kindness to a stranger to be guided in his way, and a pleasure to travellers to meet with suitable company: this is a work that may be done *after a godly sort*, in a manner worthy of God, or suitable to the deference and relation we bear to God. Christians should consider not only what they

must do, but what they may do, what they may most honourably and laudably do: *the liberal mind deviseth liberal generous things*. Christians should do even the common actions of life and of good-will after a godly sort, as serving God therein, and designing his glory.

V. The reasons of this directed conduct; these are two:—1. *Because that for his name's sake these brethren went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles*. It appears thus that these were ministerial brethren, that they went forth to preach the gospel and propagate Christianity; possibly they might be sent out by this apostle himself: they went forth to convert the Gentiles; this was excellent service: they went forth for God and his name's sake; this is the minister's highest end, and should be his principal spring and motive, to gather and to build up a people for his name: they went forth also to carry a free gospel about with them, to publish it without charge wherever they came: *Taking nothing of the Gentiles*. These were worthy of double honour. There are those who are not called to preach the gospel themselves who may yet contribute to the progress of it. The gospel should be made without charge to those to whom it is first preached. Those who know it not cannot be expected to value it; churches and Christian patriots ought to concur to support the propagation of holy religion in the pagan countries; public spirits should concur according to their several capacities; those who are freely communicative of Christ's gospel should be assisted by those who are communicative of their purses. 2. *We ought therefore to receive such, that we may be fellow-helpers to the truth*, to true religion. The institution of Christ is the true religion; it has been attested by God. Those that are true in it and true to it will earnestly desire, and pray for, and contribute to, its propagation in the world. In many ways may the truth be befriended and assisted; those who cannot themselves proclaim it may yet receive, accompany, help, and countenance those who do.

Verses 9-11

I. Here is a very different example and character, an officer, a minister in the church, less generous, catholic, and communicative than the private Christians. Ministers may sometimes be out-shone, out-done. In reference to this minister, we see,

1. His name—a Gentile name: *Diotrephes*, attended with an unchristian spirit.
2. His temper and spirit—full of pride and ambition: *He loves to have the pre-eminence*. This ferment sprang and wrought betimes. It is an ill unbecoming character of Christ's ministers to love pre-eminence, to affect presidency in the church of God.
3. His contempt of the apostle's authority, and letter, and friends. (1.) Of his authority: *The deeds which he doeth contrary to our appointment, prating against us with malicious words*. Strange that the contempt should run so high! But ambition will breed malice against those who oppose it. Malice and ill-will in the heart will be apt to vent themselves by the lips. The heart and mouth are both to be watched. (2.) Of his letter: *"I wrote to the church (v. 9), namely, in recommendation of such and such brethren. But Diotrephes receiveth us not, admits not our letter and testimony therein."* This seems to be the church of which Gaius was a member. A gospel church seems to be such a society as to which a letter may be written and communicated. Gospel churches may well expect and be allowed credentials with the strangers who desire to be admitted among them. The apostle seems to write by and with these brethren. To an ambitious aspiring spirit apostolical authority or epistle signifies but little. (3.) Of his friends, the brethren he recommended: *Neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth those that*

would, and casteth them out of the church, v. 10. There might be some differences or different customs between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. Pastors should seriously consider what differences are tolerable. The pastor is not at absolute liberty, nor lord over God's heritage. It is bad to do no good ourselves; but it is worse to hinder those who would. Church-power and church-censures are often abused. Many are cast out of the church who should be received there with satisfaction and welcome. But woe to those who cast out the brethren whom the Lord Christ will take into his own communion and kingdom! 4. The apostle's menace of this proud domineerer: *Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth* (v. 10), will remember to censure them. This seems to intimate apostolical authority. But the apostle seems not to hold an episcopal court, to which Diotrophes must be summoned; but he will come to take cognizance of this affair in the church to which it belongs. Acts of ecclesiastical domination and tyranny ought to be animadverted upon. May it be better agreed to whom that power belongs!

II. Here is counsel upon that different character, dissuasion from copying such a pattern, and indeed any evil at all: *Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good*, v. 11. Imitate not such unchristian pernicious evil; but pursue the contrary good, in wisdom, purity, peace, and love. Caution and counsel are not needless to those who are good already. Those cautions and counsels are most likely to be accepted that are seasoned with love. *Beloved, follow not that which is evil*. To this caution and counsel a reason is respectively subjoined. 1. To the counsel: *Follow that which is good*; for *he that doeth good* (naturally and genuinely doeth good, as delighting therein) *is of God*, is born of God. The practice of goodness is the evidence of our filial happy relation to God. 2. To the caution: *Follow not that which is evil*, for *he that doeth evil* (with bent of mind pursues it) *hath not seen God*, is not duly sensible of his holy nature and will. Evil-workers vainly pretend or boast an acquaintance with God.

Verses 12-14

Here we have, I. The character of another person, one *Demetrius*, not much known otherwise. But here his name will live. A name in the gospel, a fame in the churches, is better than that of sons and daughters. His character was his commendation. His commendation was, 1. General: *Demetrius has a good report of all men*. Few are well spoken of by all; and sometimes it is ill to be so. But universal integrity and goodness are the way to (and sometimes obtain) universal applause. 2. Deserved and well founded: *And of the truth itself*, v. 12. Some have a good report, but not of the truth itself. Happy are those whose spirit and conduct commend them before God and men. 3. Confirmed by the apostle's and his friends' testimony: *Yea, and we also bear record*; and that with an appeal to Gaius's own knowledge: *And you* (you and your friends) *know that our record is true*. Probably this Demetrius was known to the church where the apostle now resided, and to that where Gaius was. It is good to be well known, or known for good. We must be ready to bear our testimony to those who are good: it is well for those who are commended when those who commend them can appeal to the consciences of those who know them most.

II. The conclusion of the epistle, in which we may observe, 1. The referring of some things to personal interview: *I have many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen, but I trust I shall shortly see thee*, v. 13, 14. Many things may be more proper for immediate communication than for letter. A little personal conference may spare the time, trouble, and charge, of many

letters; and good Christians may well be glad to see one another. 2. The benediction: *Peace be to you;* all felicity attend you. Those that are good and happy themselves wish others so too. 3. The public salutation sent to Gaius: *Our friends salute thee.* A friend to the propagation of religion deserves a common remembrance. And these pious persons show their friendship to religion as well as to Gaius. 4. The apostle's particular salutation of the Christians in Gaius's church or vicinity: *Greet thy friends by name.* I doubt they were not very many who must be so personally saluted. But we must learn humility as well as love. The lowest in the church of Christ should be greeted. And those may well salute and greet one another on earth who hope to live together in heaven. And the apostle who had lain in Christ's bosom lays Christ's friends in his heart.