

The rule of three: introduction to John's letters

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 June 2014

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] Most people here know I've had a more intimate engagement with the legal system this week than I would really like.! On Tuesday my bag was stolen and I had the keys in the bag and then the person got into the house and stole my Mac computer which is why I'm using this one instead tonight.

But I have to say to see the meticulous way in which the police go about their business investigating and constructing a case is actually quite impressive.

They're very careful to make sure all the evidence is properly recorded and all hangs together and makes sense. And of course right back in the law of Moses there was this passage which is basically a passage about how a court should be conducted under Mosaic law.

And the important thing is that one witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offence he must have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

And obviously the implication here is that two is an absolute minimum but three will be good. And it seems that John has this passage in mind in his letter because there's a lot about testimony and a lot about investigation.

[1 : 28] And in particular 1 John 5 verse 7 says there are three that testify. The spirit, the water and the blood and the three are in agreement. Well notice of course the idea was that the judges would question the witnesses and make sure their testimony agreed.

And if they didn't then of course the testimony was invalid. We'll look later on in what that actually means about those three witnesses.

This thing actually that there's some debate over. But just look at for the moment the fact that it's three. Three witnesses. Three witnesses. And in fact if you have an authorised version it says it also says something about the three that bear witness in heaven.

Now actually that's almost certainly not in the original text and it's been put on as a gloss later. Yet it does even that shows that whoever was reading it had picked up on this importance of the being the three witnesses.

Because we live in a society don't we in which the only certainty is that nothing is certain. And then we're told that faith involves believing six impossible things before breakfast.

[2 : 44] Well everybody quotes that. I was reading a book the book Who Made God and he says that he quotes that and says I have to admit that everybody writes on this debate quotes that.

It's an Alice Through the Looking Glass I think. Yes. Certainly one of the Alice books. But that's not what faith is about and it's certainly not what John thinks faith is about.

Faith is about testimony. Certainty is about testimony. John's having none of this. He writes his letters so that we should be absolutely clear and convinced about what the gospel is.

And what our place is within it. So just before we dive in let me just mention a bit of the background.

There are three letters attributed to John by ancient history. Ancient testimony of ancient tradition.

They're actually anonymous. None of them is actually sort of signed as it were by John.

[3 : 49] This first one just says that was from the beginning which we have heard. Which certainly suggests it's one of the apostles. The other two letters actually are addressed from somebody called the Elder.

Now that has caused some confusion because again the Christian histories do mention somebody else called John the Elder. But most scholars have agreed that the message of these letters is clearly the same.

They're clearly by the same author. And the theology is so close to that of John's gospel that it must be that they're written by John the Apostle.

Who of course also wrote John's gospel and the book of Revelation. John as I already mentioned. Remember James and John in the gospels always appear together.

The sons of thunder. And yet James was the first of the twelve. Other than Judas of course. James was the first of the twelve to die. Herod killed James the brother of John with a sword.

[4 : 52] It says in Acts. James was the first of the apostles to die. John almost certainly was the last. The letters were probably written from Ephesus because we know that John spent a lot of time in Ephesus in his later life.

They're probably quite late in terms of New Testament literature. And again when we look at later on at some of the heresies that John seems to be addressing. We'll see that that's part of the reason for thinking it was written quite late.

But we won't go into that today. We'll just try and get some sort of overview or introduction as to what John's letters are about. And what he really wants us to know.

Not good. Ah, wake up. No, it won't change slides. That way. No, it just makes it bigger.

Ah. So I suggest that as we come to the epistles you keep the number three in mind.

[6 : 09] We've already seen the three witnesses. There are of course three letters. Although you might perhaps think of them as one letter and two appendices. The theme of them is very much the same. But the last two are very short.

And just much more personal. And we've already seen that John seems to be thinking about this verse. Where it says there should be three witnesses.

The Mosaic law. And certainly there should be more than one witness. And notice that actually quite a lot of the epistle.

For instance if you look at chapter 2 verse 1. He says dear friends. I am not writing you a new command. It's written in the singular. But this first passage. Is written in the plural.

It says that which was from the beginning. Which we have heard. Which we have seen with our eyes. Which we have looked at. And our hands have touched. This we proclaim concerning the word of life.

[7 : 11] John wants us to be clear. That it's not just something he's made up. The we.

I'm not exactly sure who the we is of course. But we assume that it refers to the other apostles. And the other disciples. Who had literally witnessed the life of Christ.

And the events surrounding it. So the letter is not written by a committee. And yet this first section is written in the plural. Just to emphasize the point.

It's not just I, John. John saying this. We. All the apostles witnessed this. We know what we're talking about. And you notice also that three senses are involved as well.

We heard it. We saw it. And examined it closely. And we touched it even. It's interesting that it's not enough that.

[8 : 13] For me to just give them a description of the items that were taken from me. I actually have to look at them. And perhaps I even have to touch them. And say yes that's definitely my phone. That's definitely my cards or bag or whatever.

One sense perhaps could be. Misled. Or deceived. It could be a madness or a hallucination. But says John.

We didn't just hear voices or see visions. This all happened as a matter of history in the real world. And it doesn't often talk about we touched it. But it does here.

And perhaps that's because touching something is in many ways the most difficult sense to fool. If you get hold of something.

Feel it. Then you know it's solid. It's there. And John says we actually grabbed hold of it. This happened as history in the real world.

[9 : 15] And we heard it. And we saw it. And we touched it. We used our three senses there. Actually three occurs quite often. You'll notice for instance in chapter 2.

12 to 14. He talks about three categories of hearers. He talks about children. Young men and fathers. I'm not going to go into that again now. We'll come back to that later.

But the threeness is quite repetitive in John. Why did John write his letters? Well he's not going to leave us any doubt of that either.

In fact he tells us. I have to cheat a little to make it three here. Because he actually says I'm writing to you four times. But there are three outcomes together with a warning.

So the first thing he says I'm writing this to make our joy complete. 1 John 1 verse 4. It says our joy.

[10:18] If you look at the footnote. Some manuscripts say your joy. Our joy seems more difficult. So probably correct to say the scholars say. And given two possible versions.

The more difficult one is probably the correct one. Somebody thought they ought to change it. So it probably is our joy. But I don't think it matters too much. The point is that the result of this gospel. Is supposed to be joy.

I'm not writing to make you miserable. Or to make us miserable. And I'm not writing because I'm really fed up with you a lot. And I'm not writing because I think I'm going to say this. But I know you're going to take no notice.

No he says I'm writing this. That we can rejoice together. It's a matter of joy. Joy is what we're. Target is. And then in 1 John 2 verse 1.

He says my dear children. I write this to you. So that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin. We have one who speaks to the father in our defense.

[11:19] Jesus Christ. The righteous one. He wasn't going to leave that out. But he does say I'm writing to you. So that you will not sin. So that you will live consistently. And coherently. In your Christian life.

And then in 1 John 5 verse 13. Perhaps the most. In one sense. The most important one of all. Because it's kind of the theme of the letter. I write these things to you.

Who believe. In the name of the son of God. So that you may know. So that you may know what? You may know. That you have eternal life. It's about assurance in other words.

You know. You may hope or think. That you have eternal life. But I want you to know it. I want you to be quite clear. And certain on this. So that's why John writes the letter.

He wants us to know. That we have eternal life. And he wants us to live consistently. With that knowledge. And when we do that. He wants the result. To be joy.

[12:22] For those who preach the gospel. And to those. Who received it. But actually. The phrase. I'm writing these things. Does occur once more. So I have to cheat a little. To make it three.

In this case. Because there is also a warning. And that's in 1 John 2 verse 26. Says. I am writing these things to you.

About those who are trying. To lead you astray. There are those who are trying. To confuse you. To make your knowledge. Less certain. To make.

Lead you into sin. Or to. Make you miserable. For what we glean.

From the letters. And from the external history. John's opponents here. Were not the Jewish circumcision party. Who. Paul wrote against so much. But. Some form of Gnostic heresy.

[13:17] And there are all sorts of. Different Gnostic heresy around. But. What they had in. Common. Is that they. Devalue. The physical. And that's again.

Another reason. Probably why John says. I touched it. It wasn't some. Spiritual airy fairy thing. I got my hands on it. And. I. And. John is warning them.

That's. You know. If they believe the lie. Then their joy. Will be destroyed. And they'll fall into sin. And. And he tells them to be skeptical. In 1 John 4.

1 to 2. He says. Dear friends. Do not believe. Every spirit. But test the spirits. To see whether they are from God. Because many false prophets. Have gone out into the world.

This is how you can recognize. The spirit of God. Every spirit. That acknowledges. That Jesus Christ. Has come in the flesh. Is from God. Now we may read that.

[14:14] And. Quite slightly miss the point. The important word there. Is in the flesh. That. It's not that the Messiah. Has come in some mystical sense.

In some sort of. Super pseudo spiritual sense. A spirit that says that. Is not the spirit of Christ. Is not. The spirit of the gospel.

Jesus Christ. Has come in the flesh. And the spirit that acknowledges. That Jesus Christ. Has come in the flesh. With all that entails. It's not just a case. Of just mouthing the words. Of course. Because the devil.

Is perfectly capable of lying. But. A spirit that. That's. Genuinely. Points to the. Coming of Jesus Christ.

In the flesh. Is from God. The Gnostics. Didn't believe. That anything spiritually good. Could come from the flesh. Perhaps that's why.

[15:11] Jesus. As I've already said. Emphasizes touch. In his introduction. The Christ was. Someone you could get hold of. You could put your arm around. You could. Put your. Fingers into

his wounds.

As doubting Thomas did. John is very keen. That we should have. Sure knowledge. One John concludes.

With three things. That we should know. In 518 to 20. I won't read that now. But. There are also three things there.

We'll look at that later. Remember what Jesus. To Thomas. John's gospel. 20. 29 to 31. Because you've seen me. You have believed. Blessed are those.

Who have not seen. And yet have believed. Jesus did many miraculous signs. In the presence of the disciples. Which are not recorded. In this book. But these are written. That you may believe.

That Jesus is the Christ.

[16:07] The son of God. And that by believing. You may have life. In his name. Although John says. We are blessed in a sense. If we have. Not. Touched and believed.

We've. Are blessed. Because we believe. The message. And yet. It is important. That Thomas was able to touch. The wounds of Christ. John. That.

Touched the risen body. Wasn't some ghost. That you could put your hand through. Thomas was actually able to touch. The risen Christ. And it seems that John.

Says he touched as well. And it was important. That. John knew that he'd. Touched. And.

The gospel. Finishes. With a public endorsement. This is the disciple. That John. Who testifies to these things. And who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Again.

[17:01] There are other witnesses. Who are. Agreeing. With John. In the gospel. And I think. Again. John is keen. In his letters. To make the point. That it's not just him. We know that his.

Testimony is true. So. What are the. The themes. It were. Of the letters. I don't think.

Perhaps. John. Makes this explicitly. But I think. There are. There are actually. Three aspects to it. As well. First of all. What is the true gospel. Secondly.

Is that gospel true. And then thirdly. Am I truly in the gospel. And the gospel. Is it. Is it. Is the gospel in me. Now notice. That one or two.

Are not necessarily. Exactly the same thing. For instance. If I read Marx. And Lenin. And. Engels. Very carefully. I could probably.

[17:58] Work out. From those books. What the true message. Of communism is. But I wouldn't. Necessarily. By doing that. Endorse that. As a message. That I believe. To be true. So.

There are. Two aspects. To it. First of all. What is the true gospel. But you know. It might be. The true gospel. It might be. The true. Message. Of Marxist Lenin. Or something. But is that.

Message. A true one. Or not. And then. Finally. The existential. The post. What the post moderns. Would want to start with. Of course. What does it mean to me. But John doesn't start with that.

But he does finish there. What does that gospel. Mean to me. How do I relate to it. And how does it. Relate to me. The post moderns.

Would make. Put three first. And make one. And especially two. Unimportant. But. For John. You can only answer. Three. If you're solid.

[18:53] On one and two. First. Otherwise. You're going to get. Deceived. But although. There are these. Three. Separate things.

And three separate. Sort of. Aspects. Of the truth. That John. Is going to talk about. He also. Wants to make the point. That you can't. Really answer. Any of those questions. Without answering.

The other two. As well. So look. For instance. At this verse. One John. One eight. One of the ones. We read. Let's.

Perhaps. Expand. That phrase. A bit. If we. Claim to be. Without sin. We deceive. Ourselves. And the truth. Is not in us. So we could. Expand that a bit. And say. If we. Claim to be. Without sin.

Then we're making. A theological error. And the result. Of that. Is that we deceive. Ourselves. Because we believe.

[19:54] Something that isn't true. And what is the result. Of that. The result. Of that. Is that the truth. Is not in us. So the gospel.

Is useless to us. Because we've. Believed something. That isn't the true gospel. And we believe. Something that isn't true. So. While there are. Those three aspects.

Um. He always. Puts them together. You can't really. Um. Answer one. Without answering the other. And yet. In a sense. You do have to answer them.

Separately. And you have to emphasize. Those three things. But. They're all related. Of course. And then he goes on. To say. If we confess our sins. He's faithful and just. And will forgive us our sins. And purify us. From all unrighteousness. If we claim. We've not sinned. We make him out. To be a liar. And his word. Has no place in our lives. In other words.

[20 : 47] He puts the opposite. If we confess our sins. If we get. The gospel right. Then. He will forgive us. And justify us. But then he says.

But if we claim. We haven't sinned. Says the same thing again. We make him out. To be a liar. And his word. Has no place in our lives. The gospel is. Not effective for us. So how do we know. Well. John gives. Three tests. Of. What we might call. True Christianity. Or. True. The genuine article.

So. In. On those three. I would suggest. Our obedience. Love. And doctrinal truth. And they're all. There in John. And yet. They're all. Twisted together. So. One. John. Two. Verse. Four. He says. The man who says. I know him. But does not do.

[21 : 45] What he commands. Is a liar. And the truth. Is not in him. So. If he's not obedient. To the commands. Then. He doesn't have. The truth in him. And then.

John's great theme. Of love. One. John. Two. Nine. To ten. Anyone who claims. To be in the light. But hates his brother. Is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother. Lives in the light. And there is nothing. In him. To make him stumble. So love. Is always at the center. Of everything. That John has to say. And then.

There's doctrinal truth. So. One. John. Two. Verses. Twenty. One. To twenty. Twenty. Three. Says the following. I do not write to you. Because you do not know the truth. But because you do know it. And because no lie. Comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is the man. Who denies. That Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist.

[22 : 43] He denies the father and the son. No one who denies the son has the father. Whoever acknowledges the son. Has the father also. So he says in these three things.

If you have. Don't have any of these things. Then you're not in. You're excluded. The truth isn't in you. But he also says. If you do have these. Then in a sense. You have all the others as well. Because the truth is in you. And is effective. And you live in the light. But they're not separable. These things really. Although we can separate them out. And yet. They're always plaited together. And if you just turn over.

A few pages to 2 John. So 2 John. Verses 5 and 6.

Says the following. Now dear lady. Is that the right verse? Hang on. Sorry. I meant.

[23 : 43] Four to six. Sorry. I meant to start at verse four. It has given me great joy. To find some of your children. Walking in the truth. Just as the father commanded us.

And now dear lady. I'm not writing you a new command. But one which we had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love. That we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning. His command. Is that you walk in love. Notice how those three. Aspects of truth. Love and obedience. Are plaited together.

So intimately. That you have difficulty getting them apart. They're all there though. And yet. They're all. Mixed and plaited in together. So in one sense.

Although we can separate these three. Aspects of. John's message. Love of doctrine. Obedience. Love and doctrinal truth. And in fact. In the next few studies.

[24 : 40] We are going to separate them out. And focus on. One or the other. But. In a sense. You have the package. The package is all or nothing. You know. It's not a case of two out of three ain't bad.

You. Have to have. All of them. Because you haven't got all of them. You haven't got any of them. Well. So that's. We're coming to the.

Towards the end of my. Introduction to John's. Letters here. But. There's just one more point. I'd like to note. We've been studying Romans.

Haven't we? And Romans is all about. Justification by faith. Isn't it? It's the main theme. Really. Of Romans. I mean. It's expanded. A great length. But. The basic theme.

Of Romans. Is. That we are justified. By faith. You might think. They come from our English. Translations. That John.

[25 : 36] Doesn't talk about faith. In fact. I think in the NIV. The word faith. Only occurs. Once. But. That's actually. Really. Just.

A quirk. Of our. English language. And our English. Translations. Because in English. Belief. And faith. Can have. Can have slightly. Different meanings. Faith.

Is obviously. A noun. And it. Usually. Refers. To the state. Of. Being in belief. So it's. It's a thing. About the state. You're in. You have.

Faith. Is a description. Of the. State. You're in. There is no. Proper verb. You can get. From faith. In English. There's only. The rather clunky. To put your faith in.

Or to. Something like that. Which is obviously. No. Good. For the point of view. Translation. So the translators. Use. The verb. Use. To believe. And of course.

[26 : 32] We're further confusing. Because when we talk about. That we get another noun. From believe. Of course. In English. Which is. Belief. Belief. But belief. Tends to refer more to the content. Of what we believe.

You know. We have a. A doctrinal statement. A list of the things that we. Believe. Like a creed. But in English. In Greek.

Those concepts. Are not. Separate. And there is only one. Word. There's the. Attempt to. Pronounce the Greek.

I'm not good. I'm a Greek scholar. As you know. But the noun. Is pistis. Which we get our words. Like epistemology. Of course. The noun. Is pistis. Which. Is usually. Translated. Faith.

Although it can also mean. Belief. The. The content of faith. And the verb. Is pistis. Which means. To believe. And we remember.

[27 : 30] That Jesus himself. When he talked about. Justification by faith. Used the verb form. He said. The work that God. Requires. Is to believe. The one he has sent.

Which is saying. The same thing. But in the verb form. Instead of. Using the term faith. And. This separation. Just doesn't exist. In the Greek. The. The.

The. It's the same. Root. The same noun. And verb. And. The noun form. Can mean. Both the state. Of being in belief. And the. Content of that belief.

And I think. Quite intentionally. Really. The. New Testament. Writers. Don't. Separate those. So. James. When he talks about. Justification by faith.

Saying you believe. There is one God. Well even the devils. Believe that. It's the content. Of your belief. What you're really. Putting your trust in. That matters here. And I think.

[28 : 24] When we. Talk about. Justification by faith. And of course. We need to do that. It's central. To the gospel. But. We need to remember.

That what it means. Is that in which. We put our trust. We're not really. Justified by. Faith. We're justified. Through. The content.

Of that faith. When we put our trust. In. The saving work. Of the Lord Jesus Christ. And all the. The rest of the gospel. Content. So.

John certainly does. Believe in justification. By faith. But he. Just. Tends to. Express it. In slightly different words. And it's good that he does really. Because otherwise.

We get in trouble. When we get these new. Perspective on Paul. People say. Even. Respected. New Testament scholars. Like N.T. Wright. Conservative scholars. They did. You know. Is that really what Paul meant?

[29 : 18] Well. We have it in. Different words here. And it's. And at the end of the. First letter. We get this chiasm. Which says exactly that.

He says that. Everyone who believes. I'll read it off here actually. Because I've spread out the chiasm there. Anyone who believes. That Jesus is the Christ. In other words.

Puts his faith. In. The gospel of Jesus Christ. Is born of God. And everyone who loves the father. Loves his child as well.

This is how we know. We love the children of God. By loving God. And carrying out his commands. This is love for God. To obey his commands. And his commands. Are not burdensome. Why are his commands.

Not burdensome. Because everyone born of God. Overcomes the world. And how do we know. That we're born of God. This is the victory. That has overcome the world.

[30 : 17] Our faith. And I say this is the only. Time that I think. The noun faith. Occurs here. But. It's the same. It's. Those who believe. Are those born of God. He's not saying that.

Belief. Results in being born of God. Because that wouldn't make sense. And the other scriptures. Teach otherwise. But what he is saying. Is your belief. Is the very evidence.

The fact you put your trust. In the gospel of Jesus Christ. Is the very evidence. That you are born of God. Jesus said. Unless you're born. You can't see the kingdom of heaven.

You can't understand it. You can't get a grip on it. So if you are believing. And if you have understood. Why Jesus came. And who he was. Then that is evidence. That you're born of God. God. But there's also the. Practical existential evidence. As well. The fact that you. Love the father. You. And you love the children.

[31 : 14] That you're obedient. To the commands of Jesus. And the commands of the father. How do we love. Show our love. We obey the commands of God. God. And the fact that his commands.

Are not burdensome. To obey the commands of God. If we love him. Are not burdensome. To obey the commands. Of a hated. Ruler or master.

Is burdensome. We may be forced to do it. But we don't want to. But if we love. God. Then we'll be. Rejoicing in doing his.

Commands. And so even the joy comes in here. At least. Implicitly. Because he says. It won't be a burden to us. It won't be a struggle. And if we. Are born of God.

Then we. Overcome the world. How do we overcome the world? Well. What exactly does that mean? Perhaps again. He's thinking of those words of Jesus.

[32 : 10] For God so loved the world. That whosoever. Believes in him. Should not perish. But have everlasting life. He's saying. You. In a sense. Escape. From the world. You overcome it.

In that sense. And how do you do that? Which is the victory. That has overcome the world. Our faith. In a sense. It's circular.

As. These chiasms often are. They all go together. In a sense. You can start anywhere. But you go all the way around. If you love the father.

Then you're born of God. And you believe. If you believe. You're born of God. And you love the father. Amen. Amen. So if you believe.

To summarize that. If you believe. And put your trust in the provision that God has made through Jesus. Victory. Has been promised. So in the coming weeks.

[33 : 03] We're going to unpack. These letters. A. A bit more. But. I could almost stop there. And say. Well if you've. If you've read that bit. You've read all of John's letters. But we won't. We will look at it in more detail.

Because he does have a lot more to say. About how this. Works out in practice. And so. But. If. We believe. That Jesus is the Christ.

That shows. We're born of God. We can know then. That we will overcome the world. So let's. Sing another.