

Imitate what is Good

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Date: 04 July 1999

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 4th of July 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Imitate What is Good and is from 3 John verses 1 to 15. God we thank you that you speak to us.

We pray that we'll understand this letter and understand how it applies in our own lives and in our lives as a church. We pray that we may fulfil what it commands and we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. I get lots of mail which is a good thing because I like the mail. Although most of it I disregard. In fact there's quite a few letters I just leave unopened and toss into the waste paper bin.

That's the problem when you put where it's from on the outside of the envelope. You can do that without opening it. It wasn't until I became a vicar that I realised just how many different Christian groups there were all asking for money and you can't support everything.

[1 : 10] And there's also a lot of my mail that's fairly boring. Yet another diocesan circular and advertisement for some other sort of event or conference or service or farewell or welcome or installation or consecration consecration or something else.

But occasionally embedded in all this mail that gets a brief look is a personal letter. A letter from a friend or relation.

Somebody writing to me, taking the time and writing personally. And if you're like me, such a letter is like gold in the midst of all the dross of the rest of the mail.

For a letter shows that somebody cares, that somebody's taken the time and the effort to communicate, to express love or encouragement or whatever.

Companies that run polls tell us that when they get a letter criticising them or complimenting them, they value it much more highly than a phone call.

[2 : 14] So if you want to write to, if you want to communicate something to a company that's done a good job or a bad job or to your local member of parliament or you want to respond in some way to some survey, if you write a letter, it's worth at least ten times a phone call in the weight by which those companies or members of parliament are assigned to it.

And the same surely for us. Letters, handwritten letters, show much more effort than a phone call or even these days an email.

So when we read 3 John, this little letter that in some ways looks so insignificant in the New Testament, it's a good example for us of Christian caring.

John, the author, taking the time and the effort to communicate something to his friend Gaius. It's just one page of papyrus probably. And if you're like me, when you write a letter and you get to the end of the page, you think, oh, it's not worth starting another page.

And you often say that, it's not worth starting another page, see you later. You know, Paul. Well, John probably has just written the one page of papyrus. But let's follow his example.

[3 : 25] Let's be people who spend the time and the effort communicating to our Christian friends and family. Let's remember that people matter. That's what John is showing by example in this letter.

That's what God tells us, that people matter. Let's make sure in our life and practice that people matter and we communicate that. Now, this letter is slightly unusual in the New Testament because it's written to an individual.

There are a couple of other letters to individuals, but the great bulk of them are to churches as a whole. This letter is from the same person who wrote the letter we read last week, John, who calls himself the Elder, presumably well known to the readers of his letters as the Elder.

And it's written to a man called Gaius. We know little of him, apart from the fact that he seems to have been a dear friend of John. John was one of the 12 apostles of Jesus. And this Gaius, we know little of, except that he's called beloved four times in this letter. So there's a sense of affection here. He's a dear friend of John.

[4 : 37] And John also says about him that he loves him in the truth. The same expression we found last week in the letter John wrote to the church.

He loves him in the truth. He doesn't love him because they've got lots of things in common. He doesn't love him because they are compatible or he finds something lovable in Gaius.

He loves him because they are fellow Christians. That's the reason. He loves him in the truth. That is, he loves him in the fellowship of those who are saved by the Gospel and grace.

And that ought to be the same for all of us Christians, that we love each other in the truth. We often find other Christians who we find it hard to like or we find it hard to love.

We don't find much in common. But we are to love each other in the truth because we're fellow Christians saved by the same love, the love of God demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

[5 : 44] And the little expression to love in the truth brings together the key themes of last week again. Truth and love. Truth being what we believe to be right or what is right and we must believe in that.

And love being right behaviour, right action. And the two for Christians are indispensable. They're essential for us. It's not one or the other and it's not one compromising the other.

We are to love and we are to have truth or believe in truth. Right belief and right action together. Not one or the other. And indeed when both are genuine, truth and love are inseparable.

Normally in a letter in the ancient world what would follow after what we've got as verse 1 would be a little greeting. We saw that last week with grace, mercy and peace. That's not here which again is slightly unusual.

Indeed John goes straight into his prayer and the topic of the letter. There is a little greeting at the end as we'll see. John says in verse 2 Beloved I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health just as it is well with your soul.

[7 : 02] Notice that John does not say I hope things are going well with you which is probably how most of us would say that. He doesn't say I wish or I trust that things are going well with you.

He says I pray that things are going well with you that you are in good health and so on. That's a good example for us to follow.

It's easy to get into the ways of this world and say to somebody I'm thinking about you or I hope things are going well. But as Christians we ought to be praying. And when we pray let's tell those for whom we're praying that we are praying.

So if you're praying for somebody and then you write them a letter or ring them up say I've been praying for you such and such if there's a particular topic that you're praying for them. It's much more encouragement to know that a Christian is praying for you than thinking about you.

It's nice to know that somebody's thinking about us. It's nice to know that somebody hopes that things are going well for us. But as Christians we can express something much more substantial and much more encouraging than just our hopes and wishes.

[8 : 13] Our prayers. Because when we say to somebody we're praying for them and we're praying then we are bringing God into the equation and that's a greater encouragement. I remember at the end of my teenage years and in my early twenties a lady I hardly knew said to me one day that she prayed for me every day and had done for some time and no doubt continued for some time.

I was astonished because I hardly knew her. She was the mother of the wife of the minister at the university church where I was involved. This godly lady who's now in glory a Scottish lady I need to say prayed for me and that was a great encouragement and I'm sure that many of the things that have happened to me in my life have been in part God answering her prayers.

So let us follow her and John's example here and pray for each other regularly and then when we communicate with each other we can say honestly I have been praying for you.

And we will be encouraged by that in our Christian life and also of course God will answer those prayers. Well John's prayer is a prayer for physical health something we are keen to pray for of course.

But beyond physical health and it may be that Gaius was ill we're not quite sure John also acknowledges Gaius' spiritual health. He prays that his physical health may be as good as he's

heard his spiritual health is.

[9 : 58] He knows that Gaius is spiritually healthy and he's praying that his physical health will match that. Indeed John's real ultimate concern of course is Gaius' spiritual health although he does pray for his physical health.

And it's a reminder to us I think. We are keen and quick to pray for physical health when we are physically unwell. Each week in our notice sheet we have a list of members of the church who are physically unwell.

Do we show the same concern for spiritual health? I wonder if we put a list in the notice sheet each week of those who are spiritually unwell.

Might be a bit more embarrassing mightn't it? Maybe a longer list. But let us pray for each other's spiritual health as well as physical health.

That's what John is doing here in effect. Well he's heard that Gaius is spiritually well and that's demonstrated by what he says in verse 3. I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth.

[11 : 11] Namely how you walk in the truth. And John's overjoyed by that. He's not indifferent to it. He doesn't, it's not that he doesn't care, he does care and he cares deeply about this spiritual state of his Christian friends.

He says in verse 4 I've no greater joy than this to hear that my children are walking in the truth. His children may refer to the fact that he himself was instrumental in their conversion or it may be just an acknowledgement that he has some authority within that church.

But notice that John's joy is for Christian perseverance. No doubt he was overjoyed when Gaius and others became Christians but his joy is sustained and overjoyed when that Christian beginning keeps going, when they persevere in Christian faith.

I remember when I was at university a number of people became Christians who are friends of mine. Two in particular brought us great joy. A number of us had been praying for them and talking with them and helping them understand scripture and spiritual truth for some time and at separate occasions each of these two friends became Christians and it was great joy.

I remember for one of them at least we had a party to celebrate his nought birthday party as a Christian. We actually had a first birthday party a year later for this particular friend.

[12 : 37] Times of great joy and now when I hear from one of those friends it's evident that he's continuing in Christian things. He's involved as a lay person in his church in the Blue Mountains and it brings me joy to think back to those times of his conversion and now to see with joy again his ongoing walking in truth and love.

But for the other of these friends the one for whom we threw a party the day he became a Christian it's clear that he's drifted and his spiritual faith is ebbing away.

And that's the cause of great sadness I think. Now the point of saying that and reflecting on what John is expressing with his joy at Gaius in verses 3 and 4 is to make us think about our own heart. Are we filled with joy when we see people become Christians? Are we filled with joy when we see Christians keep on being Christians? Or do we just take it for granted?

It ought to be something that brings us joy to see our Christian friends those here in this church each week continuing to walk in God's truth and love.

[13 : 56] Or maybe you don't care. Let your heart be attuned to God's who also is overjoyed when someone becomes a Christian and overjoyed when they persevere in the same faith.

Well the evidence for Gaius walking in the truth is that he expresses great love and that's found in verse 5 onwards. In verse 5 and the beginning of verse 6 John says beloved you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends even though they're strangers to you.

They've testified to your love before the church. Now Gaius it seems is a generous provider of hospitality. It seems that when Christian ministers and missionaries are passing through his town he is keen and eager to provide hospitality for them and then when it's time for them to move to the next place to send them on well.

In those days Christian missionaries needed other Christians to accommodate them. There weren't the abundance of hotels and motels that we are used to.

And Gaius is prepared to put up Christian ministers and missionaries who are even strangers to him people he's never met. Such is his generous love and hospitality.

[15 : 17] And it seems that those people those strangers to Gaius have in other places or maybe personally to John testified to Gaius' hospitality and love. And John is encouraging him by saying that he's heard reports of that and what a good thing it is.

Now last week in 2 John we saw a warning a warning not to be hospitable to false teachers. The flip side of that we see here to be generously hospitable to faithful Christian ministers and missionaries who are passing through the town.

Gaius is a fine example of such hospitality and love. Now this paragraph gives us a little insight into the way the early church worked. Often in those days Christian ministers were itinerant.

They would go from place to place. We see that of course in the Acts of the Apostles when Paul and Barnabas and Silas and Timothy and others are moving from town to town to preach the gospel.

Sometimes they go to towns where there are no Christians. Other times they go to somewhere there are one or two. Christians in those days needed depended upon other Christians hospitality in the places to which they visited.

[16 : 39] John encourages Gaius to send on the missionaries when their time has come to move worthy of God he says at the end of verse 6. That is presumably to give them a letter of commendation so that they can go to the next place with a letter of reference or recommendation of their Christian faith and ministry.

It may mean giving them food to take with them for the journey maybe some money maybe it means providing washing their clothes and so on while they're with you so that they can go on with everything ready etc.

Remember that these are not just Christian travellers the Christians from Victoria heading up north for their holidays in the winter or something like that. These are Christian ministers or missionaries that's seen in verse 7 they began their journey we're told for the sake of Christ that is they've set out for the purpose of Christian ministry and missionary work in the ancient world and John says that at the end of verse 7 they accepted no support from non believers that is they would come to a town to preach the gospel and they would not look for or receive financial or any other support from people who are not Christians now the point of that statement is that in the ancient world there were lots of pagan philosophers travelling around earning their living from their wisdom and preaching they would demand fees and money for their services in the ancient world but the principle that is underlined here is this that if we are to preach the gospel to people who are not

Christians a gospel of God's free grace then there ought be no charge for it on those who are not Christians you cannot preach a gospel of free grace and then ask people to pay you for it to support you in your ministry if we are going to people who aren't Christians we must not expect or demand payment now the implication of that is well who's going to pay for this Christian ministry and the answer is other Christians other Christians not in that place where there are non Christians but other Christians back in other churches and that's what Gaius it seems is exemplifying he is one who's equipping these people giving them money or food or whatever so that they can go on to a place where there are no Christians and preach the gospel and we see some of that also in the Acts of the Apostles as well the assumption here is that there is a unity between Christians of all places and therefore a mutual support for

Christian ministry people are Christians have to be prepared to pay for ministry that they don't themselves necessarily receive but ministry that is given to others who are unable or not the result of such things and this is verse 8 we ought to support such people that is we Christians and we may become co-workers with the truth not everyone of course is a minister or a missionary but we are all supposed to be fellow or co-workers with those who are through our support of them now there are a number of ways in which that might apply to us I guess we as a church here ought generously to support Christian ministry and mission for other people's sake now for you individually that may mean that we give generously in the collection plate for ministry that happens here and ministry that happens elsewhere in the country and overseas so on is our work even if we never go to the mandarin service or never visit

[22 : 03] Nigeria or Nepal it is our work we are fellow workers with their work that means we can own it not in the sense of controlling it but we share in it as much as those who are actually on the field do it so let's make sure that we do take an interest in it it is after all our work let's find out what's going on let's pray and let's write but another application also in a different area for us is about hospitality let us make sure that we are generous in our hospitality of other Christians even

strangers that is Christians we do not know at church on Sunday let us be generous in welcoming people we've never met before friends of mine were on a sabbatical in Cambridge five years ago for six months they knew that that was the only time that they would be there for that six months and they started a fellowship at one of the main churches in the centre of Cambridge and

I remember Clarissa saying to me when I visited them in Cambridge that one family in particular had been extraordinary in their hospitality of them befriending them providing meals for them visiting when they were sick helping them on practical things around Cambridge taking them out for trips and so on and Clarissa asked them why do you expend such love on us when we'll be gone in just a couple of months and after all most of us wouldn't would we if we know someone's coming for time they'll be gone and so on and the response of that family as I remember Clarissa saying to me was we love people God loves people and he wants us to love them as well I thought that was a great model of what Gaius is modelling here as well let us be people like that let us be lovers of other

Christians even if we've never met them before let us be hospitable people back to lunch Paul and Jennifer were in England just recently and they found out with people they'd never met before going to church and inviting them back for lunch after church what a great example of Christian hospitality the end of August we'll have our next hospitality Sunday the last Sunday in August and we encourage you to be prepared to invite people for lunch or we'll organise who goes where but be prepared to be hospitable for fellow Christians from Holy Trinity maybe even whom you don't know in September again we'll have a group from Ridley College here for a few days of activities and mission to can can can I encourage you to think about being a billet for some of those people if you're prepared to do that that would be a great act of hospitality you could let me know afterwards if you're prepared to do that let's make sure that our commitment to truth is matched by a commitment to love that's what

John is commending in this letter now even though Gaius' example is a good one there are examples that are bad and the example of diatrophies is not a good one diatrophies is mentioned in verses 9 and 10 there are a number of things that he's guilty of doing wrong firstly he loves to put himself first that is himself not others himself not Jesus himself not the gospel himself for the motivation of ambition or ego or power we're not quite sure but rather than the ambition of service and servanthood of other people that's reflected in the fact that he doesn't acknowledge John's authority John the apostle he rejects his authority maybe it's a personality clash we're unclear of the exact relationship between John diatrophies and the church that he's writing to thirdly he spreads false charges against John malicious gossip things that are untrue things that are to bring down John's reputation or character in the eyes of the church we're not sure the content of that probably doesn't matter for us fourthly he's inhospitable to other Christians he refuses to welcome the friends we're told in the middle of verse 10 of those people we saw last week and the weeks before in the letter of Jude were false teaching an absence of truth diatrophies problem is an absence of love and it's just as serious in effect he's a hypocrite by claiming to be in the truth and yet not walking in love and the implication for him is serious we ought not to think that somebody who is devoid of love is just a little bit unfortunate they are reflecting in their emptiness of love the emptiness of their relationship with God who is a

[27 : 34] God of love so John can say in verse 11 beloved do not imitate what is evil that is diatrophies but imitate what is good whoever does good is from God whoever does evil has not seen God a serious statement to make of diatrophies but the good example follows in the third person that is mentioned in this letter Demetrius verse 12 he is the one to imitate everyone has testified favourably about Demetrius that is the first evidence for him everybody is general comments about him secondly the truth itself testifies in his favour it is hard to see how the truth itself testifies except it may just be meaning the facts speak for themselves if you look at Demetrius in the light of God's standards it will be evident that he meets them he's not found wanting he's a person whose truth is seen in love and thirdly John himself and those with him testify in his favour and Gaius can know that John's testimony is reliable

Demetrius may well have been the bearer of this letter and maybe and maybe and maybe this is John's commendation of him as he comes to visit Gaius that's the positive example for Gaius to follow and others like him as well well John brings this little letter to a close in verses 13 to 15 he says I've got more to write but I'm going to come soon there's a sense of urgency here eagerness to come and visit this church and to visit Gaius and then we'll be able to talk face to face he says in

verse 14 and he finishes the letter with a standard greeting just like we without much meaning write yours sincerely at the end of a letter John finishes with a greeting but one that has more meaning probably than our yours sincerely he says peace to you it can be easy to be trite in such a greeting but probably John is reflecting more substance than we might think they're

Jesus words to his disciples where John himself was there the night before Jesus died and Jesus said to them my peace I leave with you not wishing somebody from Kosovo peace as in an end to war but the peace that comes from God himself and with his people a peace that passes all understanding that's the peace that John wishes Gaius at the end of this letter it's spiritual peace just as it is physical as well John passes on the greetings from those who are with him and he asks to be remembered to each Christian there by name maybe because he wants to show that each person matters maybe also because he wants to make sure that they know his thoughts about Diotrephes to whom John had already written we're told in verse nine but that letter may well have been suppressed and destroyed well this little letter reminds us that people matter and more than anyone

Christians have an obligation to love people and above all to love their fellow Christians John is urging us as he was urging Gaius to show love to other Christians to put other people first not yourself to love even Christian strangers that's not easy to do it's easy to love lovable people it's easy to love people with whom we're compatible it's much harder to love all Christians even those we do not know but we're commanded to do that for the sake of the gospel for the sake of Jesus love to us which was in a sense indiscriminatory for his sake we are to love each other but there may also be an unexpected blessing as we pursue love for each other the writers of the Hebrews put it like this let mutual love continue love for do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it let us then continue with mutual love for Jesus sake Amen