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Walking in the Truth

Face to Face Series

3 John 1-15

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So let's not kid ourselves this morning. We know from our study of John's letters that community is important. But let's not kid ourselves; community is difficult. Living face to face is incredibly challenging. Now that's true of community in general, but it is also true of Christian community, and sometimes that can be disappointing to us because we expect more of Christian community. But community is difficult. Christian community is filled with challenges. Now it's that truth that has led many people, over time, and especially recently, to say, "You know what? I'm going to pursue my faith alone in isolation. I'll watch church online. YouTube is church because it's easier." It's easier, but it's not better. Living face to face is difficult, but it's what we're called to. The question we have to ask ourselves is, "As we consider this call to community, do we really believe, as challenging as it is, that it's worth it?" Engaging face to face with one another as God's people is difficult, but it is far better than living the Christian life alone.

That's what we want to consider this morning as we conclude our study in John's letters. So, turn with me to 3 John. Third John is the shortest book in the New Testament, just 15 short verses. Unlike 1 and 2 John, which were addressed to communities or to specific churches, 3 John is a little unique because it's written to an individual, one individual within the Christian community that John has already encouraged and challenged. So it's because of that, it offers us a unique insight, a very practical consideration of what it looks like to live our Christian life, to walk in the truth in the midst of community.

So John begins in verse 1:

> **The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.** (*NASB, 3 John, vs. 1)

The elder, as Bryan mentioned last week in our study of 2 John, is the Apostle John, now old in age, probably around 90 years old. For that time, it was very old, but he is still at it, still digging in, still engaged in the work of ministry. He's still leading; he's still shepherding, even as he's in his waning years. We know that because the way he addresses the recipient of this letter clearly communicates that he has leadership stake. He has a relationship with this person that he's writing. This is the beloved Gaius. John loves Gaius. This is someone with whom he has relationship. There's warmth; there's affection. John knows this person. In fact I think it's very likely that John himself is the one that led Gaius to the Lord, perhaps years ago. There's affection; there's warmth; there's leadership. John has shepherded this person. John says that he loved Gaius **in truth**.

Now truth and love are two themes within John's letters that come out clearly as marquee elements of what the Christian life is all about. It's about love. It's about truth. Truth, for John, always refers to the truth that we have in Jesus Christ. God sent His Son into the world to be a sacrifice for sin. That's the truth that we cling to. Now that truth also is what enables us to live in love. And so John loves in truth, because the love that we have for one another, is because of the gospel. It's because in Christ, God has saved us, and He's brought us into a different family. He's brought us into a new

family, and the operating system for this family of God under Jesus Christ is love, care for one another, seeking out what is good for one another. John, writing to beloved Gaius, **whom he loves in truth,** continues:

> **Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.** (3 John, vs. 2)

Now I want to talk about this verse for a moment in detail, because it's a verse that's been misused, especially over the past, oh, 40 or 50 years. There have been a number of teachers that have used this verse to support and to proclaim what we would refer to as prosperity theology, a prosperity gospel. The essence of the prosperity gospel is that if you believe and you believe strong enough—if your faith is strong enough—then what God has promised is that you will be financially prosperous and that you will be living your entire life in perfect health. I just saw a clip the other night of a preacher saying just this. He said, "I have a mansion because God loves me, and because I'm full of faith. I've never been sick, because God cares for me." They pull that from this short verse, which just suffice it to say, is reading way too much into verse 2.

Verse 2 is really just a basic convention of letter writing. This is the way letters were written in the first century. Even for people who weren't believers, they would often begin their letters saying: Hey, I'm writing to so and so. And then they would just say something very general, like, "I hope everything is well with you. I hope you're prospering." This is a little bit like if I sent an email, I might begin by saying, "Hey, John, hope you're well," and then I'd get on to the body of the letter. That is all John is doing, except John is a follower of Jesus, so he doesn't give a vague wish. He is praying that Gaius would **prosper**. It's a perfectly appropriate thing to pray. Verse 2 doesn't suggest that there is any guarantee in life that if we follow Jesus, we will be financially prosperous or that we will live in perfect health. In fact, if we look at the history of the church, nothing could be further from the truth. It's unique that we're reading a letter from John who was in his old age, because all of his counterparts, all the other disciples who became apostles, all of them were martyred for their faith. To read into this that somehow God has promised this, is certainly to take the text too far. John is wishing that Gaius and praying that Gaius would prosper, would be well, just as He knows that Gaius' soul is well. He knows Gaius is spiritually flourishing. His inner life is flourishing. He knows that Gaius is growing in his faith. As we continue, we'll see that growth was very evident to others. Verse 3:

> **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.** (Vs. 3-4)

So now imagine John, 90 years old, and we think he's in the town of Ephesus at this time in his life. He's sitting there one day, and then he sees a band of fellow workers—missionaries who had gone out and they're coming back into town—making their way to his house. They get together with him and they want to tell him how everything went on their last journey, their last mission to proclaim the gospel. And they say, "Hey, do you remember Gaius?" And John says, "Of course, I remember Gaius. Yeah. How's he doing?" And they say, "You wouldn't believe it. He's flourishing; his faith is growing. It's amazing to see how he's walking in truth."

Walking in truth in the New Testament, particularly in the New Testament letters of Paul and others, always is referring to living your life according to the truth. So this wasn't mere profession for Gaius; he didn't just profess to believe these things. He actually believed the truth, and it absolutely radically transformed his life. It affected everything. He was living according to the truth, walking it out day by day. And as he did that, of course the world around him took notice. Not because he was doing it as a show, but just because when your life has been transformed by Jesus, when Jesus has gotten ahold of you, it affects everything. So this group comes back. They report to John exactly what happened and how Gaius was doing…that he was walking in the truth. And John tells us that provoked something in him. What did it provoke in him? It provoked joy… joy beyond comparison…incomparable joy! He says, **I have no greater joy.** No greater joy means that's peak joy. There's not greater joy. The greatest joy John has experienced comes through hearing that his little children are walking in the truth. To hear that those he's led, those whom he loves, those whom he's raised up in the faith, those who he first proclaimed the truth to, it has taken hold. God has gotten a hold of them and they are now growing. They are growing and multiplying. Those are two words we use just to sum up what happens when God gets a hold of us. We grow in our faith, and then we want to share that faith with others. We want to multiply that out. It brought John incomparable joy.

At the beginning I asked what is lost if we are not engaged in community? Is it worth it? What I want to suggest to you is that if we were to abandon life face to face with one another, if we were to give in to that temptation—to maybe take our journal and our Bible and just live the Christian life alone—we would be forfeiting the opportunity to have a front-row-seat to the work that God is doing in the lives of others, a front-row-seat to see how God and the drama of God's grace, comes in and transforms a life. To miss out on that, to miss out on that front row seat to the drama of God is to forfeit the opportunity to experience incomparable joy. **No greater joy**, John says, no greater joy is available. And our world needs joy. We, as people, are longing for joy. The world is running everywhere, trying to figure out, "Where can I find something that is deeply satisfying? Where can I find a drama to be caught up in that is satisfying to my soul?" John tells us there is a drama like that, and it's available to all of us. All it requires is that we engage. We engage in the work God is doing…incomparable joy **walking in the truth**. That's what Gaius was doing. Others took notice, and as John continues here, he's going to get specific as to what precisely had Gaius done that prompted this report. Verse 5:

> **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.** (Vs. 5-7)

So in a word, here's what Gaius had done. He had demonstrated his faith. He had walked in the truth by being hospitable and welcoming and supporting missionaries. That's basically what's being described here. In these first few centuries of the church, of course it wasn't only the apostles that were going out and were proclaiming. There were groups of people who had their lives so turned upside down by the gospel, that they thought to themselves, "*I can't do anything else but go and proclaim this to others. This changes the world."* And so they would do just that. They would team together, and they would go from place to place, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now when they went out, they often would go out with nothing in their hands. They wouldn't take anything with them to provide for themselves, and they would do that as a demonstration of their trust and their confidence that God would provide for them. And God did provide for them. He provided for them through faithful Christians, faithful brothers and sisters that would welcome them in, that would be hospitable. And Gaius had done just that. These people came into his town. They were strangers. He did not know them, but because the Spirit is thicker than blood, and he knew that these brothers and sisters were brothers and sisters in Christ, he welcomed them into his home. He probably provided a meal, gave them a place to sleep, and then sent them on their way with provision for the journey. He had done all this for them because they were people who had gone out **for the sake of the Name**. They had gone out to bring Jesus Christ and His name glory. Gaius welcomed these ministers of the gospel, and John wanted to commend him for it. This was a demonstration of his faith, a demonstration of how he was walking in truth. Now as John continues, he's going to make it clear that through his support, Gaius didn't only show hospitality, but he became a participant in the very work these missionaries were doing. He says in verse 8:

> **Therefore we** (That is all of us) **ought to support such men,** (Here's why) **so that we may be fellow workers with the truth.**

We **ought to support them**. We ought to be generous to them. We ought to be hospitable to them. Why? Not just because it is good, but because, in so doing, we join in the work. We get to become participants in the very work of God that was spreading throughout the world. Just a moment ago, we talked about how John's incomparable joy was provoked. It was brought about by seeing, by being involved in the lives of others, and seeing God work in their lives. He saw that they were walking in the truth and he was filled with no greater joy. Now here he tells Gaius, "As you support them, as you are generous, here's what happens. You get to get in the game. You are a participant now in the very work of God that is moving forth throughout the world. Not everyone can go but all of us can play a part." This isn't lip service. John is not trying to make Gaius feel good. He's clearly saying that in supporting them, in being generous to them, you actually now are a member of the team. You are a fellow worker with the truth. I don't think there's any question that as we join in the work that God is doing here in the lives of one another, but also throughout the world, we get caught up into something that is so much bigger than us, so much greater than us, that we get caught up into the joy of God's very work. That's what Gaius had done. John commended him. He wanted him to keep it up, and he needed to encourage it, because we're about to find out in verse 9 there were others that were not supportive of these missionaries.

We said as we began, that community, even Christian community, is quite difficult. And if there's anything we've taken away from our reading of 1 and 2 John is that there is conflict in the church. That was what John wrote for in the very first place. There was false teaching; there was division. People had left one church because they said, "We know the truth and you don't." Certainly they're familiar with conflict, and Gaius' faithful acts, his walking in the truth, all of it was commendable. But we need to keep in mind, it was all occurring in an atmosphere, an environment filled with conflict. So we find in verse 9, John's tone clearly changes as he talks about the problem. He says:

> **I wrote something to the church; (**Now we don't know whether that's 2 John or 1 John or just a letter that we no longer have.) **…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.** (Vs. 9-10)

Now this is an ugly account; this is an ugly situation. We don't know precisely who Diotrephes is, but he clearly was a leader or someone with influence in the Christian community in this town. Whether it was the same Christian community as Gaius or whether it was a different one, we don't know, but either way we do know he was causing trouble. There was something that got into him that decided to go up against John, which is mind blowing to think about. This is the John we've talked about a number of times. You know he was at the foot of the cross. John was right there. He was in the room at the Last Supper. Can you imagine the gall of Diotrephes going up against John? Not only going up against him and contrasting his viewpoint or standing in conflict with him, but also spreading wicked words about him and his team. But then he goes a step further. Those who had been sent out from John, he rejected them; he didn't support them. But he wasn't satisfied just to deny that himself. He also encouraged other members of the Christian community to not support these traveling missionaries either. And then to even take it a step further, if they did, he expelled them from the church. Now I don't know what all was going on in Diotrephes' life, but I can be confident when I say he was apparently filled with pride. We might even call it just raw ambition. John said that he was **someone who loved to be first.** Perhaps he was just sick of the older Apostle John still having influence. He thought, "It's my time now!" So he started to lead. He started to push for influence, to push his agenda. Church, we need to beware of this raw ambition that pushes. But apparently people were willing to listen. He had gained influence. So John wrote, certainly to commend Gaius, but he also made it very clear he would have to confront Diotrephes. That would be something that he would have to do. When there's bad leaders in the church, when there are bad apples that are gaining influence and they're impacting the body, that has to be addressed. And John absolutely intended to do that when he would get there. But until that time, part of his goal was he wanted to make sure he would limit Diotrephes' influence. He didn't want his influence to spread any further than it already had, and so he wrote Gaius to encourage him, and he continues in verse 11 with the encouragement:

> **Beloved, do not imitate what is evil. (**Now that's certainly referring back to Diotrephes's actions.) **…but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.**

This Greek word **imitate** is the word from which we get our English words *mimic* or *mime* It means to copy, in a sense. It's not used very often in the New Testament, but when it is, it always is used to refer to encourage someone to follow the positive example of a good leader. "Don't imitate what is evil, but imitate what is good." This concept of imitation is one that we don't talk about very often, and I think we have good reason for being wary of it, for being a little nervous about this idea. At its worst, it can start to mean that we're just merely copying the outward actions of others. And if we do that, if we embrace that, that will lead to a deadening legalism that will be a burden for each one of us, if that's what we think John is encouraging. So we may see someone that is gaining influence, and we're seeing all the things they do, so, "I'm just going to copy that and see if I can gain the same influence." That would be a devastating thing for a church and for our own personal lives and our growth in the faith. That's not what John means. Now, Paul uses this word, and he uses it in a way that also, I think, strikes our ears as a little odd. He says in 1 Corinthians 4

verse 16, **Be imitators of me**, which, again, I think is a little shocking to us. It almost sounds a little arrogant. Say, "Well, are we really supposed to just copy you, Paul? Isn't our faith much deeper than merely copying or mimicking someone?" And yet, John says, **Do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.** Then he adds this important clarification, **The one who does good, he said, is of God. The one who does evil has not seen God.** In other words, they are not of God. This is a very important qualification for us to think about as we consider this idea of imitation.

Ultimately, if we see good, what we believe as followers of Jesus is that good is purely the result of God's work in someone's life. We see someone acting in a way that is good. We don't think, "Look at them!" What we think is, "Look at what God is doing in them!" All that is good flows from God. All that is evil does not flow from God. And so when John says, **Imitate that which is good**. Ultimately what he's commending and what he's encouraging is to imitate the faith that has its source in God, that sees God as the One that stirs up all that is good. Now I don't want to dismiss this idea. I think it's an important idea as we think about how to grow. I think there can be something to seeing something in someone else, and saying, "I long to have God bring that about in me." But we've got to think rightly about it, because if we don't, we'll start to just merely be mimes, and that is not what we're called to.

So let me give you an example. Last week Bryan talked about his retirement, and I wanted to use that same example. You know, we're coming up to the end of January, when he's going to retire. And as we approach that day, I am sure for all of you, certainly for me, I want to celebrate that moment. But I also know that's something I'm grieving about. You know in my life—I'm 46 years old—no one has been my pastor longer than Bryan, so I'm wanting to celebrate that. But I'm also grieving him stepping out of that particular role in my life. Now we began this transition all the way back in August of 2021. That's when we announced that Bryan was going to move from being the senior pastor to the senior pastor emeritus, and I went from being a directional pastor and became the lead pastor. At that time, Bryan took on a role of co-preaching, but also then writing and doing other things. The leadership load, then, came onto my plate and onto the directional teams' plate at that time. We've walked through this journey, now, for the past four years. It's been an interesting journey.

As I went to a conference a year and a half after that transition announcement in August, I was with other pastors at this conference, and I was explaining to them how we're walking through this leadership transition. And it was so interesting. To a person, every single one of them looked at me and said, "That will never work." It was very encouraging. *(laughter)* Now they said that because they had seen something similar in their own context, and every single time the senior pastor—that was the outgoing senior pastor—was unwilling to release control, was unwilling to let others lead, and the effort of transition, then, was abandoned. Now I heard that, and I understood where they were coming from, but I also, in my heart, thought to myself, "I know you're wrong." I know you're wrong because I have sat on the front row for the past year and a half with Bryan, and I'll tell you what I've seen. I've seen a demonstration of absolute humility, a willingness to let go because of his love for the church, his love for God, and his absolute contentment of who God has made him to be. And no one has forced him to do that. He, on his own, has become convicted that this is the right next step for him and for the church. Because of his humility I was confident, and certainly that's proven true.

Now, why do I tell you all that? Not to puff up Bryan. I don't know if he's here this morning but if he is, he will hate this part of the message. I tell you, because I want to imitate that humility. I actually want all of us to imitate that humility. But if what we think that means is that we need to try to copy some of his actions, then we're missing the point. What we need to do is go to the source of that humility. That humility is born of a life with God, a deep faith in God, a deep contentment, a grounding of his identity in who God has made him to be, that allows him then to say, "I can let go of this and not worry about anything, because God is in charge." I want to imitate that humility. If I'm to imitate it, I have to go after the source of humility. In Hebrews 13, the author of Hebrews says, ***Consider those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you, and considering the outcome of their conduct, imitate their faith.*** Imitation is important, but the imitation has to go to the source, imitating the pursuit of God. It's imitating the grounding of identity in God, the confidence in God. We want to imitate that. That's gospel imitation. That's not mimicking; that's not copying; that's grace-based imitation that sees someone else and says, "I long for that, and I believe God can do that as I pursue Him." That's what gospel imitation looks like.

As we get to verse 12, we actually come to the really driving point of the letter. It's just one brief sentence. But ultimately, what John was hoping to do with Gaius was commend him, but also recommend someone else. And so he says,

> **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.**

So despite the actions of Diotrephes, the mission was going to continue. Workers were going to continue to go out. And John wanted to recommend Demetrius. He said, "Hey, when Demetrius comes to town, you can trust him. He also walks in the truth. We testify to his good character. He's a fellow worker." And so ultimately, he wanted to encourage Gaius, when he comes, welcome him; be generous to him; be hospitable to him. He's one of us. Finally, we get to verses 13 through 15, just a standard closing of the letter.

> **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. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.**

This closing should sound very familiar. It's almost verbatim what John said at the end of 2 John last week. Essentially he's saying, "Listen, there are many important things I could write, but I'm not going to write it all. This stuff needs to be handled face to face. I need to get into life with you. So when I come, there's much I need to do. I need to talk to Diotrephes, but I also need to pass some things on to you. I will do that when we step into life together."

John wrote to a situation that was very messy, because community is always messy, because the very definition of community is that it is a gathering of people, and wherever there are people, there are going to be messes. That's true in all communities. It's certainly true in the Christian community. It doesn't mean there isn't a call for us. We're called to be people who embrace truth and love one another as we seek to live face to face in this community. And although it will get messy at times—inevitably it will get messy—for there will be times where there's conflict; there will be times where there's bad leaders. There will be time where there's miscommunication. All

of that is bound to happen. But none of that compromises the truth, the reality that Jesus is in charge of His Church, and He is very committed to it. It is His chosen method for the advancement of His name and His mission in the world. He is not going to stop or change His mind in His commitment to the Church. It is His bride. He's committed to it. And because of that, we can be confident, even when we walk through conflict. Even when hard things happen, we can be confident because we know the person in charge. Jesus is in charge of His church. It's going to continue to march forward. So because of that, if we believe that, then let us as a people, as a people of God here in Lincoln, Nebraska, let us double down on our commitment to Him—our pursuit of God—and our commitment to one another. Our commitment is to live out our life face to face, to enter into the difficulty of helping one another walk in truth, embrace a life according to the truth, to live a life and become a community that is marked by love…a community that will look increasingly like Jesus. Let us commit to that young and old alike. It takes all of us knowing that if we do that, if we pursue that, God will bring it about and we will step into what John calls no greater joy, incomparable joy from being caught up in God's work in the lives of one another, and in the world. **Incomparable joy!**

As we close, I want to close where we began, all the way back in September, all the way back in 1 John. Listen to how John began that letter that we began studying back in September. He says, **What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the Word of life.** (That is what is true.) —**and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete** (…may be filled up, may be made full.). Incomparable joy…incomparable joy that comes through walking in the truth together!

> *Our Father, we thank You. We thank You, and we remember here during this Christmas season, the sending of Your Son into the world, that He took on flesh for us and for our sin. He went in obedience to the cross, paying the debt we could never pay, paying the price so that we might become sons and daughters of God. We thank You for that. Lord, we pray that You, by Your Spirit, will help us be a people that have the courage to step into the difficulties of community, to walk in the truth together, that we might, by Your Spirit, experience what John experienced, the no greater joy that is to be found when we partner in the work you're doing. Lord, we ask that You would do it, and we pray these things in the name of Your Son, Amen.*

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