
The Epistles of John

“Entertaining Angels”

3 John 1-8

J don't remember if I read this or heard it at a conference, or both. The board of a local church was considering offering care and some parental training for single mothers. As part of what would be necessary they would have to provide babysitting and even a meal for the women and their kids.

This was perceived as a wonderful opportunity to make the Lord's love real and filling a specific need within the community. But one of the older men of the board had a real concern. "We've put a lot of work into maintain the church facilities. We've just completed a remodeling of the kitchen. If we allow children in we'll find messes, juice rings on the counter, spills on the rugs. We have a responsibility to care for the Lord's building."

Now, certainly this man's concerns were not without merit. And the board did have a responsibility to care for the property. But, as another member put it, "On the other hand the property should be primarily a base of operations, used to carry out the Lord's requirement to care for people. When the structure becomes more important than people, perspective has been lost."

"Yes, the children may create a mess. But the mothers, as part of their parental training, could be helped to encourage their children towards proper behavior. To drop the program because of the danger that the kitchen might get dirty is unreasonable, and in the final analysis, disobedient. Maybe the little angels will make a mess, but who knows when we have entertained angels unaware."

To serve the Lord may mean being uncomfortable. But to see lives changed, even our own through the stretching of ministry, should be worth substantial discomfort. And when we are willing to reach out to others, we will hear,

" ... Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness" (Matthew 25:21).

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I Introduction: Once again, as in John's second epistle, he gives attention of the problem of itinerant teachers. The church, to whom John was writing, was housing those who came to

them. The believers were providing for the needs of strangers. But this letter deals with the questions: Who were these strangers? and What should be the care provided?

A second problem had arisen in this church. There was at least one individual who was being disruptive. This person was attacking the saints of the body. He was creating major disruptions to the ministry. We will examine John's response to this situation in the next study.

The focus of this letter shows a marked contrast to the previous one. Where as the second letter focused on not helping false teachers, anti-Christ, here John deals with the flip side. He stresses the importance of caring for those who are truly doing the work of Christ. He also provides a warning against those who would interfere with that mission.

Also, unlike the second epistle, John names individuals in the body of the text. As a result, this provides a clearer picture of some of the activities of his day. The focus on this letter is more on the importance of practicing hospitality with discernment than a call to less activity due to lack of wisdom.

In order to provide a bit more background, I'd like to quote from John Stott's introduction.

*"The Didachē, the first-century Church Manual ... shows that early Christian hospitality was sometimes abused. Instructions are given that an 'apostle' may not stay beyond one day or, 'in case of necessity', two. 'If he stays three days, he is a false prophet' (xi. 5). On departing, he may receive enough food to last him his journey. But 'if he asks for money, he is a false prophet' (xi. 6). Again, if a prophet, apparently speaking under the inspiration of the Spirit, says 'give me money, or something else', he is not to be heeded unless the money is 'for others in need' (xi. 12). It is recognized that true prophets have a right to stay and be supported (13), but an ordinary Christian traveler must not be entertained free for more than two or three days (xii. 2). If he wants to settle, 'he must work for his living. ... If he refuses to do this, he is trading on Christ' (xii. 3-5)."*¹

II Greetings and Salutations: Once again John addresses his letter as coming from the elder. He writes from a position of authority. What follows is to be taken as carrying the weight of God's Word.

But unlike the second epistle, this letter is addressed to a specific individual, Gaius. There is absolutely no way of knowing who this person is. The name being a common one. We can assume because of the contents of the letter, Gaius was in a leadership position in his church.

John loves Gaius in truth. As already noted in previous studies, Christian relationship is always grounded in relationship with God. And that relationship always depends on an understanding of Scriptural truth.

We can never emphasize enough that for people to be saved they must understand the basic doctrinal issues for salvation. This issue was of major concern to John in the midst of anything else he may have written about. These issues include the incarnation and all that is involved with it. As Paul notes ...

¹ Stott, John R. W., The Epistles of John, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1983, p. 216-217.

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,....” And knowing this “... if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (1 Corinthians. 15:3-4; Romans 10:9).

Verse 2: It is reassuring to note that John wishes circumstantial wellness for Gaius. Apparently John didn't realize life must be miserable if one is to be in the will of the Lord. It is okay to be healthy. It is okay to get along in circumstances. I guess this is bad news for those who glory in being miserable.

But, it is also clear John is concerned for Gaius' spiritual well being. And it is safe to assume from the thrust of Scripture in general, that while God is concerned with the quality of our life, He is more concerned with our spiritual growth.

“And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.”...“Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,” (Colossians 1:10; Hebrews 6:1).

Verses 3-4: John was also pleased with the news of the faithfulness and quality of walk that Gaius had been demonstrating. Gaius' life was a testimony within the Christian community. This is shown by word having been brought back to John by other believers.

How can we be pleasing to the Lord? John had suffered a great deal in his own ministry. In fact since these letters may have been written after Revelation, John was in exile. One source of encouragement in the midst of difficult times was the growth in the lives of believers he was concerned with. The Lord's work in the lives of others frequently is used by Him to give those in ministry reassurance of the validity of their own service. And we do need this.

As we walk in the Lord we become not only a testimony to those around us, but we can also be a source of joy to those who have the opportunity to minister to us. Those of you who are parents can understand the joy received when you see your children walking before the Lord.

III Love One Another: *Give some examples of how we can demonstrate hospitality, or concern for the needs of others?* Next, John commends Gaius for his willingness to minister to the needs of other believers, who are unknown to him. In fact, the account of his service had been carried by these individuals to others in the church. Gaius demonstrated the qualities desirable for Christian leaders, balance. He was exercising love in standing for truth.

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

Support to those serving the Lord brings glory to the name of the Lord.

“He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me” (Matthew 10:40).

One quality of the early church, which to a great extent has been lost by many of the contemporary western churches, is the sense of family and care between believers.

Where believers have faced persecution there is a sense of camaraderie and shared responsibility for one another. This is often missing where lives are comfortable. We will see more believers pulling together in this society as Christianity becomes more socially and culturally unacceptable.

Verses 7-8: And believers should expect no help from the unbelieving world. Gaius cared for individuals who risked everything in the service of the Lord. The only support these believers received came from other believers. And this is still generally true. Certainly the world sometimes helps Christians carry out “humanitarian” work, such as support to organizations like World Vision in its programs for feeding the world’s hungry. But, there will never be, and for that matter shouldn’t be, support for the efforts to spread the Gospel to a fallen world.

Christians carrying out this work, which is attacked by the world, will only receive the aid and comfort from other believers. And it is this support which receives John’s commendation for Gaius.

But in the next session, we will see that Gaius apparently didn’t have the support of all in the local congregation in this specific ministry.

Conclusion: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

The principle of caring for individuals in obedience to the Lord, is one that must never be forgotten. Where ever possible we are to assist those who are serving the Lord in their career choice. John’s concern here was specifically those who where ministering outside the structure of the local church. *I wonder is this is Biblical support for the para-church ministry?*

But, I’d like to take the concept a bit further and focus on the need for individuals within the local church to being willing to commit to ministry sacrificially.

The local body, in its corporate sense, is to be a training camp for ministry. It is here we learn of God’s expectations for our life, both in terms of our walk with Him and with each other, and as it relates to our reaching out to others.

We aid the work of the Lord as we minister in care homes, support the Union Gospel Mission and provide counseling services for believers and unbelievers. But, like in our opening illustration, as we do so things may become messy. We risk seeing people come to us for aid and comfort. We may find people coming to the church who make us uncomfortable. We may find the facilities overstretched. We may find ourselves strained by being in over our heads.

And as we will see next week, we may even experience interference from within the Christian community itself. But Christ, our model, showed that God’s ministry is to be carried out in the real world, and therefore it will bring discomfort, and sacrifice.

Gaius received John's commendation because he cared for those God sent to him. He provided hospitality for those who ministered for the Lord. His reputation for showing God's love to others had reached John through others who had observed Gaius' testimony. May the same be said of us.

Let us be open to caring for God's servants whenever He calls us to do so. And even more, let us never lose sight of our responsibility to care for the community around us. Then we will please God.

“ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’” (Matthew 25:34-40).

So, let us always look for opportunities to serve the Lord and you never know just what kind of opportunity might present itself. Consider Abraham.

“ ADONAI appeared to Avraham by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the entrance to the tent during the heat of the day. He raised his eyes and looked, and there in front of him stood three men. On seeing them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, prostrated himself on the ground, and said, “My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, please don’t leave your servant. Please let me send for some water, so that you can wash your feet; then rest under the tree, and I will bring a piece of bread. Now that you have come to your servant, refresh yourselves before going on.” “Very well,” they replied, “do what you have said.”

Avraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quickly, three measures of the best flour! Knead it and make cakes.” Avraham ran to the herd, took a good, tender calf and gave it to the servant, who hurried to prepare it. Then he took curds, milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it all before the men; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate” (Genesis 18:1-8).

So keep on serving. After all, one day you may be caring for an angel!

“ Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).