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Questions for the Heart

Postcards from John, Part 9

3 John 1-4

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

In the Apostle John's final postcard, personally addressed to his beloved friend, Gaius, he writes a greeting full of encouragement, well wishes and expressions of great joy. He rejoices over his friend's progress walking in the truth and his spiritual state. Gaius followed Jesus Christ and that brought John genuine delight.

Discussion Points:

Our culture puts a high value on autonomy and independence, however the Bible desires the believer to generously invest his effort, time, and money in serving and benefiting others, not just himself, no matter the season of life.

- Remembering the Apostle John's example, how might a retiree be used of God differently than a person still in the workforce in this current culture?
- What opportunities to experience joy are missed because of selfish choices of comfort and convenience?
- What does the Bible teach about finances and the use of money?

God desires for the church to disciple and raise up the younger and less mature in the Lord in order for them to one day pass along what they have learned to another.

- In what ways have you poured time and effort into discipling or training another in their walk with the Lord? If this has not happened, what has held you back?
- Have you developed a friendship wherein you term him or her your 'dearest' friend? How did this relationship grow and become what it is?
- Do you find joy in sharing the Gospel of Jesus with others? Why or why not? How can you improve in this practice?

Discussion Guide Cont.

The Western world values physical fitness and beauty higher than moral character. Television, movies, and media feed into this superficial objective. Believers are to care for their bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit, but their ultimate goal is a higher calling.

- If your physical appearance mirrored your spiritual condition, what would it look like? Are there any areas that need improvement?
- Though it is important to keep your body healthy and fit, how can your body become an idol? How should a believer care for both bodily and spiritual health biblically?
- What are ways that having a healthy spiritual life can bring joy?

Gospel Connection:

Gaius was commended by John for walking in the truth. A believer's ability to walk in the truth stems directly from his relationship with God through salvation in Jesus Christ. God's plan of salvation allows us to know the author of truth personally, thereby giving us the opportunity to experience this truth and to share this truth with the world around us.

Practical implications:

Think: How am I using my time and money to further the kingdom? Am I spending adequate time studying God's Word?

Pray: Thank the Lord for all of the provisions that He has blessed you with. Ask that He help you become aware of using your time and provisions in ways that best honor Him.

Do: Study God's word in order to know Jesus and grow in your faith for the benefit of a healthy soul.

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3 John 1-4

Recently, I came across an article written by a Christian author who wrote that his five-year-old daughter's kindergarten homework assignment became a wake-up call.

The parents were supposed to help their kindergartener identify as many corporate logos as possible. Given the fact that these kids couldn't read, the assignment was based on sight recognition; how many names of companies or products would these children know simply by looking at a label or logo?

This author said that his daughter quickly identified Pizza Hut, Target, Lego, Disney, Jell-O and IKEA.

Sounds like she's ready for life.

After she recognized a dozen more, this Christian author was smitten by the fact that his daughter knew more logos than Bible verses. And what amazed him, he wrote, was that we didn't do corporate logo flashcard drills at home; we never taught them to her – she had simply learned them by living for five years in a brand-saturated culture.¹

That makes for good business . . . which is why advertisers are spending billions of dollars on children and their parents.

Underlying this marketing strategy is the rather obvious flaw in human nature. And it starts young. We want to have all the cool stuff everybody else has . . . and as parents we feel pressured to push our child around the block in the best stroller, sitting in the best car seat, wearing the best clothes, playing the best sport on the best team and carrying to school the best book bag and the best lunch box.

Isn't it good to know that we eventually outgrow that?

There's a fallen angel who's been studying human tendencies and fault lines for several thousand years. He knows how we shy away from sticking out and want comfort over

character and happiness over holiness and self over service.

And so he's constantly roaming around seeking some believer to devour – to discredit, you could render it (**1 Peter 5:8**).

What gets his attention more than anything else – in fact, what he hates the sight of more than anything in the world today, is the sighting of a growing, committed, Bible-saturated, Christ-honoring Christian; and with equal passion he hates the sight of a growing, committed, Bible-saturated, Christ-honoring church.

Now, over the last few sessions, we've studied together John's warning to an anonymous woman and her children.

And now John writes another postcard which we begin exploring today; it's called **Third John**. Turn there.

This is the shortest of John's three letters. Third John is shorter than Second John . . . and if you're comparing the length of the two letters right now, instead of listening to me . . . you've noticed that Third John has more verses than Second John. You're right.

Verse numbers were added, by the way, in 1551 by a guy named Robert Stephens in order to aid the student of the Bible – which was a wonderful idea.

When I say **Third John** is shorter in length than **Second John**, I'm referring to the Greek language in which he wrote this letter, and **Third John** has 26 less words than **Second John** – which means my sermon series in Third John will be about three sermons shorter than Second John . . . I say that for your edification.

Third John is not only a personal letter between the Apostle John and one of his closest friends, but it also gives us one of the most interesting glimpses into the life of a first century church.

And we'll discover together that the church hasn't changed all that much, and people haven't changed either, even though brand names and logos have come and gone.

Warren Wiersbe wrote in his introduction to *Third John* that: Wherever there are people, there are problems; and wherever there are problems, there is the potential for solutions. Third John makes us face the question honestly, "Am I a part of the problem or a part of the solution?"

Warren Wiersbeⁱⁱ

You might remember in *Second John*, the main concern of the Apostle John was to warn this woman of heretics and how to spot them and how to treat them.

Well, in *Third John*, the problem isn't a *heretic*, it's a *hothead* named Diotrephes . . . we'll get to him later on.

Follow along as I read the introduction to Third John.

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers. 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. (Third John 1-4)

You'll notice immediately that, except for a few modifications, this introduction repeats some of the same language as Second John.

So what I want to do is approach John's introduction today a little differently; I want to ask some questions of application, and then unpack the text for the right answer.

I'm going to call these five questions, *questions for the heart*. And what I mean by that is that you're the only person on the planet who knows the answers, apart from God Himself.

Question number 1:

- 1. What do I think about, look forward to and work toward most in life?**

Notice how John identifies himself, once again in the text – simply – The elder.

Instead of throwing his weight around by announcing his official office as one of the original Apostles, John emphasizes his pastoral, shepherding heart.

In other words, he wasn't just an Apostle delivering to his recipient and the church involved some kind of official word, John was emphasizing that as an elder he was watching over these believers with a heart of love.ⁱⁱⁱ

The term elder/presbuteros can also be translated "old man." And in the first century, the term typically referred to an old man who had earned the respect of others.^{iv}

And John is indeed represented by both meanings of this term; he's both a shepherd concerned for the flock as an elder, but he's also an old man; by now, in his early-to-mid 90's.

And he's doing what he loves . . . he's doing at 90 what he looked forward to doing – serving Christ, looking forward to traveling for the benefit of others, writing letters of encouragement; praying for others, teaching younger believers . . .

He obviously wouldn't understand our generation's planning and longing for the ages of 65 to 95 when you can finally get away from it all and basically live unencumbered by the problems of life.

Beloved, one of the vilest distractions of the Devil is that you need to save everything you can and plan everything in your life toward that glorious day when you get to ride off into the sunset and live off the interest and get away from people and serving others.

The ultimate goal in life is to go away and watch the tide come in? Is that it?

I'm 60 now, so I can be blunt. For those of you who are older, let me encourage you as your pastor that this can be the most productive time in your life, for the cause of Christ!

Did you know that older house-parents and teachers and doctors and dentists and painters and plumbers and bookkeepers and secretaries are needed in ministry locations around the world? Have you ever thought about

planning for that? The church is in need of volunteers in every facet of business life – from carpentry to technology.

John might be an old man, but instead of reaching for the rocking chair he's reaching for his pen, and another piece of papyrus to write another letter and make more plans for ministry; you get the impression that if you got in the way of John's cart he'd run you over . . . and he wouldn't even notice, except for a little speed bump.

Don't reach for the rocking chair.

I'll never forget reading – although I've forgotten the author's name . . . but he wrote, "I have never known a happy old man."

Why? Perhaps it's because the average man is buying into the deception he give his life to plan for himself and his estate and his finances and his portfolio so that one day he can retire and get away from people . . . but in the process of planning and saving and longing for the day when he could live all for himself he finally made it, he arrived – but in the process he arrived with a shriveled up heart.

No matter how old you are – you can be 18 or 80 – but the moment you decide life is about you, is the moment you forfeit the kind of joy that John is going to describe in this letter.

But for starters, let me introduce you to the Apostle John –who happens to be a happy old man.

Question number 2:

2. Is there anyone I am discipling or encouraging in the faith?

John writes next – *Beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.*

We frankly don't know anything about Gaius other than what we learn about him in this letter. He was evidently a respected leader in the church and a man of influence.

The fact that he's hosting traveling representatives of the church implies that he's wealthy.^v

What we do know is that he was John's close friend. John refers to him four times with the term *beloved* – or my well-loved one . . . these all refer to Gaius. You might use the

phrase "*my dearest friend*" to come close to this meaning.

Paul used this same word when he calls Timothy his beloved and faithful child (*1 Corinthians 4:17*) and then again where he calls Timothy his beloved son (*2 Tim 1:2*).

While the believer is never referred to in scripture as a child of the church – or children of the church – it does refer to spiritual children who are under the care of those who either led them to Christ or taught them the word of God. They aren't biological offspring, they are spiritual offspring.

Further, John refers to Gaius in *verse 4* as one of his children. The possessive adjective he uses in referring to Gaius as one of *my children* – strongly suggests that John had personally led Gaius to faith in Christ.^{vi}

This was John's passion and this was John's joy – leading someone through the gospel and then listening to them – and even praying with them – as they personally called upon the name of the Lord to be saved (*Romans 10:13*).

One of my greatest concerns is that most Christians I know in the church at large have never once attempted to lead an unsaved person through the gospel and to the saving claims of Jesus Christ; and the thing that concerns me the most is that the average Christian doesn't seem to lose any sleep over it.

One young lady so clearly lived for Christ that she witnessed to everyone who gave her the opportunity. One young man was interested in her and began talking to her and she told him about her relationship with Jesus Christ. He got interested in Jesus Christ too . . . and began asking questions . . . she provided the answers from the word; she invited him to church . . . one conversation after another took place until she personally led him to Jesus Christ . . . You might know them . . . he now serves on our church staff – Peter Bonner was led to Christ by Dawn . . . and later she married him.

What a way to get a husband.

One author mentioned a young woman he knew, who was saved just before her senior year of High School. She immediately prayed that God would allow her to tell every member of her senior high class in that public school the gospel – all 150 students. And God granted her request and over the course of that year she was able to find ways to witness in one-on-one conversations . . . and 15 students ended up praying to receive Jesus Christ.^{vii}

Question number 3:

3. If my physical health matched my spiritual health, what kind of shape would I be in?

John writes in *verse 2*,

Beloved (my dearest friend), I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.

This is a typical introductory comment in letters during John's generation. Which basically means, I hope you're doing well.

In fact, this line – *I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health* – was so common, that the prayer, or wish, was actually reduced to a Latin abbreviation SBVEEV – which basically represented the 6 words that can be translated, I hope things are going well.^{viii}

But John adds another line which emphasizes spiritual health. The word for *soul* here – *Just as your soul prospers* – is used here as a figure of speech for Gaius' spiritual life.^{ix}

And would you notice the implication that spiritual health is the ultimate measurement of a healthy life. In other words, measure how well you're doing, not to your body, but to your soul.

And by the way, there's nothing wrong with physical health – John wanted it for Gaius. Taking care of your body is a God-given stewardship, since you ultimately belong to your Creator – your body doesn't belong to you, it belongs to God.

You see, answering this question correctly will keep you from falling into the idolatry of John's generation and ours – where the body becomes the priority.

Even for Christians, physical health can become an unbalanced pursuit – we can become like the culture around us which is obsessed with the physical condition.^x

From your complexion to your constitution, the body can easily become what matters most.

This isn't a new problem by the way.

George Whitfield, one of the leaders in the Great Awakening in the 1700's wrote in his journal of the sad condition of people who were "more concerned about a pimple on their face than the rottenness in their heart."^{xi}

John happens to be informing us – subtly – that it's possible to have physical health without spiritual health; it's possible to have spiritual health without physical health – but you've probably lived long enough to know that some of your most powerful moments have been your weakest moments – some of your most intimate seasons with Christ have been your most difficult seasons in life.

And here's the subtle danger – it's possible to have a healthy body without a healthy spirit – which makes you an unhealthy Christian.

You can be prospering physically and materially and financially while at the same time going bankrupt spiritually.

I pulled down my collection of sermons by the Scottish pastor, Alexander Maclaren and read his exposition of this text published in the late 1800's. He writes on this text some pointed words:

Would you be content to have your worldly prosperity doled out to you from the same spoon, and of the same size, with which you are content to receive spiritual prosperity? It is a disastrous thing for a Christian when outward prosperity gets ahead of inward prosperity. When a man gets on well in the world, he too often declines in the truth. It is difficult for us to carry a full cup without spilling it.

Alexander Maclaren
(1826-1910)^{xii}

John essentially says, Gaius, I hope you're doing well physically, but I really hope everything physically is secondary to how you are doing spiritually.

Here's the fourth question:

4. Does my personality reflect a personal commitment to demonstrate Christ-likeness?

Notice verse 3:

For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in the truth.

John has already addressed this same phrase in his first and second letters. **Truth** is tantamount to all that represents Christ.

But John here emphasizes in the original construction that this wasn't just *the* truth, this was *his* truth. He owned it!

John writes, "I've gotten word back from the brothers that you are walking in the truth. You're taking the truth outdoors; you are not just learning the truth, you are living the truth. You aren't just talking about Jesus, you're living like Jesus." That's what a follower wants to do.

One theologian who lived 150 years ago used to repeat the statement that Jesus Christ never once asked for *admirers*; He constantly referred to *followers* – those are disciples who demonstrate the character of Jesus to their loved ones, to their church, their classmates, business associates . . . their world.

One more question:

5. What makes me celebrate like nothing else in life?

John writes in *verse 4, I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.*

John has essentially said the same thing in Second John but now he ratchets it up even further by saying that it doesn't just make him happy, it happens to be his greatest joy.

What makes you feel the greatest joy? What is it that really charges your batteries?

Is it corporate logos . . . the name on your automobile – your handbag – your lunchbox?

For John, the greatest joy in life was not found in something that he *had*; in fact his greatest joy wasn't even something that was even happening to *him*; his greatest joy was that Christ was doing something in the life of someone else.

Every true shepherd, every Bible teacher, every disciple maker has this sense of joy – and this sense of prayerful concern as well . . . is **Gaius** for real? Is he advancing? Is he growing? Is the soil good soil and is the seed taking root and bearing fruit?

Are those people you prayed with to receive Christ – are those people you're teaching or leading or encouraging – are they truly following after Christ.

I was watching last week online a Ted Talk which Billy Graham gave in 1998 – someone sent me the link and I watched it.

He had been invited to speak on faith and human shortcomings . . . and advancements.

It was primarily an unbelieving audience who had invited him to speak and they fully expected him to rehearse the impact he'd made on the world – you know, to rehearse the great advancements he'd made in his global ministry.

Instead, Billy Graham did the opposite – he began with a self-deprecating, funny story that showed how ineffective his preaching was, apart from a genuine work of God. I really appreciated it . . . and I know it surprised his audience – and, I would say, won them over for a hearing.

He said that he was on a plane some time ago and sitting next to him was the Mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina. They were having a pleasant conversation when a man a row ahead of them had evidently too much to drink. He started talking loudly, belligerently, flirting with the female flight crew – he got out of his seat several times and was basically annoying the other passengers. Billy said everyone was getting upset with this man.

But then the Mayor stood up and got on to him for the way he was acting and he said to the man, "Do you know who this is, sitting here?" The man said, "No!" The Mayor said, "This is

Billy Graham!” And the man stopped dead in his tracks; looked at down at him and then stuck out his hand and said, “Your sermons have really helped me.”

John writes here that his greatest joy is that Gaius, whom he’d led to Christ, was in fact genuinely saved and the evidence of it was found in the repeated testimonies of other believers who spent time with Gaius, observing his life and his walk.

And they came back to Ephesus and told John – not that Gaius was perfect, but that he

was progressing . . . he was walking in the truth . . . he was the genuine item . . . he wasn’t an admirer of Jesus as much as he was a follower of Jesus.

And for John, as he begins his letter, there is no greater joy.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 03/17/2019 by Stephen Davey.

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- i Adapted from Jill Carattini, *The Shape of Affection*, Slice of Infinity blog (5-27-16)
- ii Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Alert* (David C Cook, 1984), p. 141
- iii Adapted from Life Application Bible: *1, 2 & 3 John* (Tyndale, 1998), p. 141
- iv Gary W. Derickson, *1, 2 & 3 John* (Lexham Press, 2014), p. 655
- v Ibid, p. 646
- vi Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek Text* (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 219
- vii J. Allen Blair, *The Epistles of John* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1982), p. 229
- viii Adapted from David Guzik, *1-2-3 John and Jude* (Enduring Word, 2005), p. 112
- ix Derickson, p. 660
- x Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *1-3 John* (P & R Publishing, 2015), p. 189
- xi David L. Allen, *1-3 John* (Crossway, 2013), p. 271
- xii Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Volume 17* (Baker, Reprint 1982), p. 58