

# 2-3 JOHN

## LOVE IN ACTION



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is by Jan van Eyck (1390–1441)*

*On display in Ghent at the St. Bavo Cathedral, it looks like a statue, but it's a painting.*

John's two short epistles emphasize unity and hospitality. John condemns anyone who denies that Christ came in the flesh and he calls out an individual who has let his love for preeminence get in the way of hospitality and unity.

John's desire to be with these people he loves drives his writing.

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1 2 John 1–6 (ESV)

*The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:*

*Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.*

*I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.*

“*The elect lady*” is not a person, but a church. This is a normal colloquialism in Greek as the word for church (ἐκκλησία, “ek-klay-see-ah”) is feminine. The letter doesn’t read like it’s written to a person. The closing (*The children of your elect sister greet you.* — 2 John 1:13, ESV) seals this interpretation.

After his salutation, John rejoices in the walk of some of the church members. Then John returns to what seems to be his favorite theme—*that we love one another*. He reinforces the importance of this command with a purpose construction right at the end. *You have heard from the beginning* for the purpose that *you should walk in it*.

Okay, but if John is so happy with how this church is going, why does he need to make this point?

This must be a problem that worries John, one that even a church with a lot of members *walking in the truth* can have. They’re *walking in the truth* but not loving one another. If this seems extreme or absurd, ask yourself this—“What’s the biggest problem with the church today?”

Disunity. We embarrass Christ and grieve the Holy Spirit with all our bickering. And this isn’t about the difference between believers and heretics—we wouldn’t bother bickering with them—this is about squabbles over non-essentials.

And it’s not that we disagree; it’s that we act like we don’t love one another.

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Disagreements are healthy. They’re how iron sharpens iron. Everybody is wrong some of the time.

Unfortunately, it’s human nature to want to be right. This keeps people from learning from others who disagree with them. This is a problem for almost everyone in almost every field.

But in Christianity, it’s most embarrassing because we know we’re sinful. We’re supposed to be aware of, even embrace, our imperfections.

That should make it easier to love other imperfect people.

2 2 John 7–13 (ESV)

*For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.*

*Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.*

*The children of your elect sister greet you.*

This passage stands in notable contrast with the previous one. The love for one another that John repeatedly advocates does not apply to *those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh*. John advocates unity in Christ, and they are not in Christ.

This is harsh but important. The disagreement at the heart of this is not over whether Jesus came at all; it's about whether His coming was *in the flesh*.

As we've mentioned before, thinking His coming was not *in the flesh* is Docetism. This error is so severe that John labels someone who advocates it *the deceiver and the antichrist*.

This leads to an advanced lesson in the art of deception and how Satan opposes truth. The most effective lies are the ones that camouflage themselves to look like the truth. Saying that Jesus didn't come at all is too obviously false to fool anyone. But saying that Jesus came but had a "special," different body is trickier.

That trickiness is why the label *the deceiver* is so apt.

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But how does this fit with Romans 10:9?

*because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (ESV)*

Is Docetism a minor doctrinal error? Aren't we called to love people we have doctrinal disagreements with?

No, this goes beyond minor doctrinal issues. This error amounts to worshipping some other guy named Jesus. The Jesus you confess as Lord has to be the real, incarnate Lord Jesus, not some figment of your imagination who happens to be named Jesus.

Just getting the name right isn't enough.

3 3 John 1–8

*The Elder,*

*To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth:*

*Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.*

*Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth.*

Unlike 2 John, this letter is addressed to an individual—Gaius. John gives Gaius a message of encouragement that should thrill us all.

This letter makes Gaius one of the most famous people in history. He's in the ultimate hall of fame—commended by name in scripture. But for what? Was he martyred? Did he lead many people to faith? Was he a great preacher? What incredible work did he do?

Hospitality. Gaius rendered faithful service *for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church*. This is significant *because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles*.

Wow. Gaius was something like the head of the missions committee. He hosted and supported traveling evangelists. That's nice and all that, but this passage elevates this service to a level of honor we don't normally think of for something so unspectacular.

And that's the takeaway. Gaius's calling was very local and very humble. Yet in the kingdom of heaven, he's one of the greats.

*We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth.*

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Christianity's rejection of society's pecking orders is a big part of what gives it an "other world" feel.

The apostles invented one of the church's highest offices (deacon) for the purpose of waiting on tables—a humble task for sure.

And women were the first witnesses of the resurrection, despite that culture's rejection of the validity of women's testimony.

The kingdom of heaven isn't like earthly kingdoms. It shouldn't be.

*I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.*

After installing Gaius in the spiritual hall of fame, John now dumps Diotrephes into the hall of shame. And for what? What's John's point here?

It's hospitality again. This guy is the perfect opposite of Gaius. Not only does he refuse to *receive the brethren*, he *forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church*. Just on the control-freak level, this is nuts. His prating (incessant talk) against John is hard to fathom too. What's wrong with this guy?

Unfortunately, we get no help from other references on Diotrephes. This passage is the only one about him in all of scripture (or anywhere else). Thus, we don't get any backstory on what went wrong. We must go on only what we have here. So, what does Diotrephes do?

He *does not receive us*. He talks incessantly against John *with malicious words*. Even worse, he *does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church*.

John's inspired diagnosis is that all these things are because Diotrephes *loves to have the preeminence*. Thus we get a profound lesson in how sin can blossom into a nightmare.

Wanting preeminence doesn't sound too bad at first glance. There's nothing wrong with working hard to get ahead. But Diotrephes's desire to do well has warped into a love of preeminence. It has become an obsession. This then led to outrageously sinful behavior towards *the brethren* and even towards John the apostle.

That's pride. Diotrephes's prating confirms the diagnosis.

In *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis has a chapter on pride titled "The Great Sin." In it, Lewis calls pride "spiritual cancer." "It was through Pride that the devil became the devil."

Lewis connects it to today's passage with, "Now what you want to get clear is that pride is *essentially* competitive—is competitive by its very nature—while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident."

Loving preeminence is pure, distilled pride.

It's no surprise that great sins blossom from that root.

If anyone reading this devotional has never read *Mere Christianity*, or even hasn't read it recently, promise me you'll get around to it this year.

You cannot read that book and not be changed by it.

5 3 John 11–15

*Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God.*

*Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true.*

*I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face.*

*Peace to you. Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.*

John wraps up by noting the obvious; we should imitate Gaius and not Diotrephes. He follows up with a harsh description of the difference.

*He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God.*

But notice that while this highlights the importance of works, it does not say that works are unto salvation. Rather, they're indicators of someone's relationship with God.

But there's another theme in this passage—pity. The one *who does evil* has missed out. John isn't even saying that the one *who does evil* has a terrible destiny, only that he hasn't had this ultimate experience. His existence lacks meaning. His doing evil looks like an attempt to just do something, anything.

He needs to get life.

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*“Meaningless! Meaningless!”*

*says the Teacher.*

*“Utterly meaningless!*

*Everything is meaningless.” — Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV)*

Solomon saw the meaninglessness of life absent any relationship with its creator. Conversely, look at the way this letter closes.

John is happy about Demetrius, and *Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself*. That's a full and rich life. John is not satisfied with just writing to people he loves. He wants to *speak face to face*. The COVID lockdown taught us how John feels here; we longed to gather face to face. (I wonder what John would have thought of Zoom.) Once again, this longing is about the joy of a meaningful life.

And at the very end, John gives a curious instruction. *Greet the friends by name*. Once again, we're back to a parting term of endearment. They know how to greet each other, just as my kids know to drive safe.

Their lives are full.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

Note: some of these questions may seem to have obvious answers. That's by design. Those answers should be a good springboard for discussion.

1. When have you seen wanting to be right interfere with unity?
2. Where do you draw the line between minor disagreement and something that needs to be resolved?
3. Contrast what's admired in church with what's admired in society.
4. Why is pride the worst sin?
5. What did you miss most during the COVID lockdown?

*Items for prayer:*