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The importance of contentment. John's letter to Gaius.

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Transcript

Ecclesiastes chapter 6. There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind, a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires. Yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity, it is a grievous evil.

If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he, for it comes in vanity, and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. Moreover, it has not seen the sun, or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he, even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good. Do not all go to the one place? All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied, for what advantage has the wise man over

the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite.

This also is vanity, and is striving after wind. Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? Ecclesiastes chapter 6 is a brief chapter which largely continues the theme of vaporous wealth from the latter half of chapter 5. Daniel Fredericks has remarked upon the similarity of structure between chapter 5 verses 13-20 and chapter 6 verses 1-9.

Both sections begin by referring to an evil under the sun in chapter 5 verses 13-14 and chapter 6 verses 1-2 respectively, an evil that involves the possession and then the loss of riches. Both move to speak of begetting, yet of being without, and they also speak of the relationship between birth and death. Finally both raise the key question of the advantage of toil where satisfaction is not present, concluding by stressing the importance of contentment.

This chapter concerns the case of a man who is granted the power to get rich, yet is denied the opportunity to enjoy his wealth. Like the person who loses his great wealth suddenly and has nothing to pass on, the person who gains great wealth, yet loses his life or his ability to enjoy his wealth, is an instance of the temporary and vaporous character of riches. We might again think of Jesus' parable of the rich fool, who plans to build bigger barns yet loses his life before he can truly enjoy his wealth.

We are not the masters of our lives, nor are we the ones who determine how long we will live. Man proposes, as the saying goes, but God disposes. James most likely has Ecclesiastes in his mind when he writes in chapter 4 verses 13-16 of his epistle, Come now, you who say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town, and spend a year there, and trade, and make a profit.

Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time, and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast in your arrogance, all such boasting is evil. The case discussed at the beginning of chapter 6 contrasts with the situation described in chapter 5 verses 18-19. Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot.

Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil, this is the gift of God. The enjoyment of the

good things of life is a gift of God, both the good things themselves and the power to enjoy them. These gifts, however, are not universally enjoyed.

For various reasons, some wealthy people lose their ability to enjoy their great riches, and their wealth falls into the hands of strangers. The person who dies prematurely is an example of this, the person struck with serious illness, or the person who is taken from his land by exile. In another way, the person who is given over to dissatisfaction can never enjoy the good gifts of his life.

Every one of his gifts is a sign of what he does not possess, what he envies in his neighbour. Verses 3-6 may continue to refer to the same man as was the subject of verses 1 and 2, or perhaps it refers to another person. This person, by outward appearances, has the great blessings of long life and numerous children.

However, his life is one of misery and discontentment, without enjoyment of the good gifts of life. It ends in dishonour, as he does not even receive a proper burial, already being forgotten at the time of his death. Children and long years, far from being gifts to such a person, may even compound his misery.

Perhaps his children become burdens upon his meagre resources, and each further year of life is another year of bitter suffering, with ill health or social rejection, or maybe just a deep discontentment that he has fostered in his heart. Like Job cursed the day of his birth, and considered that he would have been better off had he never been born, this man is less well off than the stillborn child, the child who had never seen or experienced the evils that occur under the sun. In the stillborn child's greatly premature death, at least he knows some rest, while the man who lives a long life of bitter toil has an extended and unrelieved sentence of hard service.

Adding years to such a man's life won't improve his lot. The emphasis given to the man's lack of burial is also in keeping with one of the preacher's consistent concerns throughout the book, of the transitory character of life seen in being forgotten. As Fredericks observes, the man who receives no proper burial is like the stillborn infant in many respects, both pass away nameless, their bodies disposed of without much regard of their unique selfhood.

The tragedy of failing to achieve satisfaction has been a recurring theme of the book to this point. It's underlined again in verses 7-9, which recall us to chapter 5 verse 10, with which this short body of teaching on wealth began. He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income.

This also is vanity. The toil of the man in verse 7 is Sisyphean. He is constantly laboring to satisfy an appetite that is inordinate.

It's never satisfied. He never gets beyond the barest sustenance to true enjoyment. The

problem here, however, is likely not the meagre products of his toil as the unruly appetite that he possesses.

This is supported by verse 9, which partly answers the question raised by verse 8. The person given to a wandering and excessive appetite will never be satisfied. However, the wise person seeks to enjoy and reasonably to improve his actual lot, whatever it may be, rather than giving himself over to the service and pursuit of unrealistic appetites and desires. He will be less in the thrall of pursuing the vapour and seeking to shepherd the wind than the man who is given to envy, for instance.

Human beings can take up arms against their lot in life, not reckoning with the strength of limiting circumstances, capacities and other factors. But we are transitory and impermanent creatures, doomed to pass away like breath when our time comes. We can multiply our words, but the hot air will only add to the vapour.

It is far wiser to have the measure of ourselves, to know our limits, and to think and to act accordingly, pursuing enjoyment within those limitations, rather than dooming ourselves to dissatisfaction by constantly chafing at them. A question to consider. How does the modern world compound the human problem of the wandering appetite, and how might we apply the preacher's counsel to our cultural situations? 3rd John The Elder to the Beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you, and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God, for they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow-workers for the truth.

I have written something to the church, but Diatrophes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to, and puts them out of the church.

Beloved, do not imitate evil, but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God, whoever does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself.

We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true. I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will

talk face to face.

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

Third John is the shortest book in the Bible. Luke Timothy Johnson has suggested that the three epistles of John were sent at the same time by the hand of Demetrius. Third John recommends Demetrius to Gaius in verse 12, and second John was intended to be publicly read in Gaius' church.

Perhaps this is the letter that was written to the church, referred to in verse 9 of this book. First John is less of a letter than a homily, exhorting the members of Gaius' church. Third John is very unusually for New Testament epistles, a private correspondence, addressed to Gaius alone, not immediately intended to be shared with a wider audience.

Of the Johannine epistles, it is the only one to contain names, Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius. We don't know anything about the addressee of this epistle, Gaius. As Gaius was a common name, it's unlikely that the various references that we see to figures named Gaius in the New Testament are references to this same individual.

There are likely at least three or four individuals called Gaius in the New Testament. There was a Gaius in Corinth, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1.14, who may have been the host of Paul mentioned in Romans 16.23. There are probably a couple of other different Gaiuses in the book of Acts, a Gaius in Macedonia in Acts 19.29, and a Gaius in Derbe in Acts 20.4. Many scholars have suggested that John's epistles were written in the context of Ephesus in Asia, the letters that begin the book of Revelation are also addressed to churches in that geographical region. If this were the case, it would weigh the identification of Gaius away from the Corinthian and Macedonian Gaiuses, for instance.

Gaius may have been the overseer of a church under John's more general regional oversight, or perhaps he was simply a fellow minister in the region of a church where John had formerly ministered. What we do know is that Gaius is dear to John in the Gospel. John loves Gaius in the truth, which might simply refer to a love that is true, but likely has a thicker meaning than that, relating to the way that John loves Gaius in a manner thoroughly shaped and contextualised by the truth of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle John has often been spoken of as the Apostle of Love. As Robert Yarborough notes, this title is well deserved, not merely for the extensive character of John's teaching concerning love, or the peculiarly close relationship that he has with our Lord in the fourth Gospel as the disciple that Jesus loved, but also for the way in which John articulates the loving warmth of the bonds between Christians in places such as this, the beloved Gaius whom I love in truth. John expresses his prayer for Gaius, that he would materially prosper and would know good health as things go well with his life or with his soul.

Presumably John is wishing that Gaius would know material wellbeing that corresponds to the spiritual wellbeing and progress that he is showing. It appears that believers who had visited Gaius' church had visited John on a number of occasions, bringing with them positive reports about the wellbeing and growth of Gaius and the believers in his congregation. These were most likely travelling missionaries, who had been given hospitality by Gaius while they were there.

Some of the visitors to whom John refers may have been those to whom John referred in 2 John 4, or who brought him reports of this matter. I rejoice greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. It is a cause of great encouragement to John to hear of the spiritual progress of persons under his spiritual oversight, or persons for whom he was instrumental in their coming to faith.

Indeed, for John there are no joys that really can compare with this joy. The life of the faithful Christian minister is tied up with those under his oversight, in ways that can exceed even that of the relationship between a parent and their natural child. John highly commends Gaius on his faithful performance of his ministry, of which the brothers who had visited had given him a report.

The brothers seemed to have been strangers to Gaius, rather than members of his church. They had benefited from Gaius' generous hospitality and had reported upon Gaius' faithfulness and love to the entirety of John's congregation. The showing of hospitality would have been a very important part of the life of the early church.

They were in a pioneer situation, with many workers travelling to and fro, developing the connective tissue between congregations within and across different regions, sharing gifts, bringing news from place to place, strengthening churches that were very young in the faith, and planting new congregations. In such a situation, generous hospitality, in the provision of shelter and support, was one of the things that kept the spiritual supply lines of the early church open. It allowed for gifts and ministers of the church to be communicated effectively to those places where they were most needed.

Such hospitality shown to the messengers of Christ is often highlighted in its importance in the New Testament, not least in the parable of the sheep and the goats. It is possible that the persons who brought these reports about Gaius and his church were going to be passing through Gaius' city again on the return leg of their journey. However, John's encouragement to welcome, hospitality and support of travelling ministers may have been a more generic one concerning future visitors of such a type.

The travellers in question, most likely travelling missionaries as we have seen, have gone out on their missions for the sake of Jesus' name and have not accepted support from the unbelievers. John here uses a word that is commonly translated as Gentiles, but which differs from the word commonly used for Gentiles, being found only here and in Matthew's Gospel, where it refers to those outside of the community of faith. By

accepting nothing from the unbelievers, such missionaries depended upon the Lord and maintained the integrity of their mission, which might otherwise have been compromised if they had been teachers for pay, for instance.

Supporting such persons is important, as it enables people like John, Gaius and the travelling missionaries all to perform their particular vocations as fellow workers for the truth. Verse 9, which refers to something that John had written to the church, most likely refers to the book of 2 John, which probably accompanied this private letter. However, there is a figure, seemingly a member of Gaius' congregation or otherwise under his oversight, who is resistant to the authority of John, and perhaps also Gaius and the other Christian teachers as well.

Maybe there is a personal dispute between John and Diotrephes, or perhaps Diotrephes is someone who will refuse to accept the teaching of 1 and 2 John. Whatever is the case, Diotrephes is characterised by a desire to put himself first. Jesus had taught his disciples in Mark chapter 9 verse 35, if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all, and in Mark chapter 10 verses 42-45 we read, And Jesus called them to him and said to them, You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them, but it shall not be so among you.

But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. By the description of Diotrephes here, he is someone who rejects this ethos, being driven by ambition and a desire for dominance.

Beyond not acknowledging the authority of persons such as John and Gaius within his context, he also bad-mouths them, spreading discontent that undermines them. He refuses to welcome travelling missionaries, and also opposes those within the church who would try to do so, to the extent of excluding them from the congregation. By refusing such hospitality, Diotrephes would have made it very hard for ministers to operate in his context.

Alistair Stuart, in his work *The Original Bishops*, suggests that it is quite likely that Diotrephes was a wealthier member of the congregation who owned the house in which others met. By virtue of the fact that the early churches largely met in private houses, a person who owned a larger house in which others met, and in which travelling ministers could be hosted, would enjoy a lot of influence, even beyond that which their greater power of wealth and social status would have given them. John says that when he visits, he will address these matters with Diotrephes.

People will be known by their fruits. People whose lives are marked by evil have not seen God, whereas those whose lives are characterised by doing good are from God. These are the people that must be imitated.

Gaius is encouraged to consider the people with whom he associates, and the people that he will imitate. While dealings with someone like Diotrephes may be unavoidable for him, he must recognise what someone like Diotrephes represents, over against the faithfulness of the travelling missionaries and Demetrius. John proceeds to praise Demetrius, adding his testimony to that of many others that Demetrius is a man of good character.

Beyond the testimony of fellow Christians, he is found to be true by the truth itself. Demetrius was likely the bearer of the epistles. He was possibly sent as more than simply a message bearer, but as a representative of John in some greater capacity.

The ending of 3 John is much the same as the ending of 2 John. John shares his intention to see Gaius soon, when he visits the congregation again. Then they will be able to talk face to face.

He concludes his letter by conveying greetings. Such a letter isn't merely correspondence from one Christian to another. It is also a channel by which Christians who would never have had the chance to travel any great distance in their lives could nonetheless be in regular contact with Christians elsewhere in the empire, communicating their needs and greetings through their ministers.

A bishop-like figure like John ensured that local churches were opened up and connected to the universal church, preventing them from becoming insular or sectarian. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which churches can protect themselves from figures like Diotrephes?