

Sermon Transcript

August 23, 2015

“First Impressions”

3 John

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on August 23, 2015, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. It is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio/download version of this sermon may also be found on the church web-site at www.wethefc.com.

SERMON TEXT

3 John

¹The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. ²Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. ³For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. ⁴I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

⁵Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, ⁶who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. ⁷For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

⁹I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰So 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.

¹¹Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. ¹²Demetrius 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.

¹³I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. ¹⁴I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. ¹⁵Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them.

INTRODUCTION

What kind of impression do you make on people? I have been thinking about this question all summer. While on sabbatical I read David Brook's best-selling book *The Road to Character*. Back in April, I shared with you what he had written about this book in an *Op-Ed* piece in the *New York Times*. In this article he said that he admired those rare people who seem to be "deeply good." He says that about once a month he runs into such a rare person and that when he does it both brightens his day and, at the same time, saddens his heart. It saddens him because he feels that he has achieved a level of "career success" but not necessarily "that generosity of spirit, or that depth of character." In the article he tries to identify where those virtues come from. He calls those virtues "eulogy virtues." It is those things you want said of you at your funeral. They typically have nothing to do with career accomplishments. Rather they are virtues of kindness, bravery, honesty, faithfulness—and of course the capacity for deep love. And so, in the book he writes of people who made such an impression upon him. What kind of impression do you make on people?

Perhaps, a more profound question to ask is this. What kind of impression are you making on people for God? That is, after all, for the Christian the more pressing issue, is it not? At the end of the day, what we really want is for people to see Jesus living through us. By God's grace, we want to leave a positive impression for Jesus. There is old Puritan prayer that captures this desire well. The title of the prayer is "Man's Great End!" In other words, this is the purpose for which we live. Here is how it starts: "Lord of all being, there is one thing that deserves my greatest care, that calls forth my ardent desires, That is, that I may answer the great end for which I am made—to glorify You who has given me being, and to do all the good I can for my fellow men. Truly life is not worth having if it be not improved for this noble purpose."

Here is the sobering thought in all of this. I think many people base their impression about God and about Jesus based on the impressions they have of us, the church. It is true that "faith comes by hearing," I don't discount the role the Word of God and the Holy Spirit play in opening a heart to Christ. But I also believe that your life and the impression your life makes is what God often uses to help people hear the message and consequently form their conclusion about Jesus.

One of the sayings we say around here captures this reality. We often say, "Good Works leads to Good Will which opens opportunity for Good News." For those who have been around here for awhile, do you recall the "poster child" that embedded this truth in our hearts? One Sunday, we passed out envelopes with money in them. Some people got \$10, some \$15 and some \$20. You were charged to see what you could do to multiply that money in 90 days and give it to someone in need. In ninety days we went

form \$2,300 to over \$20,000. Two ladies who attended our church and worked together, combined their money and bought ingredients to bake flan and they sold it at the workplace. They raised \$800. They then took that money and gave it to a woman at work who was a single mom and the man she was with was not the father of her children. She also had cancer. She came to the service the morning we celebrated what God had done over those 90 days. Her co-workers stood up and shared what they did and they handed her the microphone. She stood up and said, “I lived a hard life. Before I got this gift, I thought God was punishing me. When I got this money, for the first time I thought God may actually love me. She came in that week to talk and I had the opportunity to share the “Good News of Jesus” with her and she gave her heart to Christ. We got to walk with her the last eight months of her life.

Do you see it? An impression about what God is like was made through an act of kindness. It was a reflection of the character of God that opened the door for the message of Jesus to find root in this woman’s heart. The question isn’t “are you making an impression about God on others?” Rather, the question is, “What impression are you making on others about God?” You are making an impression.

When Paul is instructing Timothy as to how to conduct himself in the church, he says to him, in 1 Timothy 4:16, “*Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.*” In other words, your life is as much of a lesson about God as the lessons you teach. Earlier he said to Timothy, “*set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.*” See, the impression you make through simple things, like your speech and the way you conduct yourself tells people something about God. After recently doing three funerals in eight days, I was reminded of how powerful these “eulogy virtues” really are in people’s lives. They are often communicated in the simple everyday things of life. Your actions or the impressions you leave are so powerful that Paul tells Timothy that, by watching his life—the impression he is making— and his doctrine, he will “*save both himself and his hearers.*”

What kind of impression is your life making for God? The title of this sermon is “First Impressions.” By that I am not referring to the first time you meet someone. We often ask, “what was your first impression of the person you met?” By saying “first impressions,” I am not referring to the timeline of your relationship. Rather, by saying “First Impressions” I am referring rather to a higher priority. Ultimately, what someone thinks about me is not my highest priority. The higher impression I want to leave on someone is the sobering reality that my life will communicate something to that person about God. That is the “higher” impression, the impression of first importance, the “first impression” and it often is on display through the simple things of life. My aim in life is that the way I live gives people a positive impression of God.

3 JOHN

It is with this in mind that I come to 3 John, the book with the fewest words in the entire Bible. This month we are looking at three of the books in the New Testament that are only one chapter long. To this point we have looked at Paul's letter to Philemon and last week we looked at 2 John. This morning we come to 3 John.

Some of the background we shared last week on 2 John is helpful in understanding this letter. As we affirmed last week, this letter is written by the Apostle John who conducted a rather extensive ministry in Ephesus and the surrounding area of Asia Minor. We also know from the first two letters written by John that he was dealing with conflict and strife within the churches under his care. The nature of the conflict was theological. As we observed last week, there were some within the church who denied that Jesus was the Christ. If Jesus is not fully God and fully man then the whole faith comes tumbling down and consequently, there is no atonement for sin. Both 1 and 2 John acknowledged this conflict; and John's instruction in his second letter was to not extend any hospitality to any traveling preacher who was preaching a view of Jesus that denied that He was the Christ. By extending hospitality to a traveling missionary, they were lending support; and so John did not want them to support these men who were deceiving the church and those who still professed faith in Jesus as the Christ.

When you come to 3 John, the presence of conflict is still evident. The difference between 3 John and the first two letters of John is that this third letter is written to an individual. Just like Paul's letter to Philemon, this third letter of John is written to a dear friend by the name of Gaius. The first two letters of John are written to the church. In fact, I think the first letter might have been a letter that was circulated to several churches, while the second letter was sent to a specific church, and this last letter was sent to a specific individual, namely "*the elder and beloved Gaius.*"

Let me tell you what prompted John to write this letter to Gaius. There were itinerant missionaries that had been sent out, most likely by John, to minister to various churches in the region. We saw last week that the city of Ephesus was the "hub" from which John ministered to all of Asia Minor. When he writes the letter of Revelation, he sends it to seven churches scattered about Asia Minor, starting with Ephesus. And so these traveling itinerant missionaries are sent out by John to proclaim the gospel and support the work of the church that is taking place throughout modern day Turkey.

These traveling missionaries depended upon the hospitality of other Christians along the way. They didn't book rooms in hotels. Rather, they were dependent upon the hospitality of people in the church. There are several times in the New Testament where

Christians are exhorted to extend the ministry of hospitality to strangers, and to especially open their homes to those who were expanding the kingdom of God through their missionary efforts. Jesus even said, in Matthew 10:40-42, that when you extend hospitality to someone who is taking the gospel to other places, you are in essence receiving Jesus into your home.

So these traveling missionaries came to a certain community with the blessing of John. But there was a church leader in this community by the name of Diotrephes who refused to receive them and he even went as far as flexing his muscle by removing people from the church if they extended hospitality towards these traveling missionaries. John, the Apostle, said in verse 9 that he even wrote a letter to the church vouching for these servants of God, and still he was spurned by Diotrephes. Diotrephes had “something in his craw” against John and he would not acknowledge John’s authority.

But that was not true of Gaius. Look what John writes to Gaius starting in verse 5, *“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.”* Gaius graciously extended hospitality to these missionaries sent from John; and so John thanks and praises his good friend, Gaius, for his hospitality extended to these travelers and, in essence, thanks him for his partnership in the gospel.

As John addresses this issue in the third letter of John, he makes mention of three different men. He makes reference to Gaius, the man he wrote the letter to. He makes mention of Diotrephes, the man who spurned John’s authority and refused to extend hospitality to these traveling missionaries. And then, in verse 12, we briefly become acquainted with a man by the name of Demetrius. What I notice about John’s reference to these three men is that he doesn’t just mention their names, but in this letter he conveys the impression their lives and their actions have made on him. He makes note of the impression their actions are making on others for the cause of the gospel and the cause of Jesus Christ. Two of the men were making a positive impression on others for the cause of Christ, while Diotrephes was making a negative impression.

TRUTH AND LOVE

Now I know we all would like to make a positive impression on others for the cause of Christ. If John were writing a letter to WEFC, and if he was referencing your name and the impression you were making on others for Christ, I know that you would want him to have a positive impression about your testimony for Christ. We understand the power

of our testimony when it comes to representing Jesus to our community and our culture.

When I take these three letters written by John, there are two themes that emerge from these letters that ought to color the impression we make on our culture. If we make this impression on others through our lives, then I think we will represent Jesus well in this culture. Here is the impression I think John is calling for in these three letters that bear his name. Those who are followers of Jesus Christ will be people who are marked by truth and love. That is the impression we need to make on this world. We believe in truth and in love. The two go together and you can't hold to one over the other. Truth without love is harsh. Love without truth is empty. Truth accompanied with love is transformative. It is powerful.

Clearly the call to truth is seen throughout these three letters. The word "truth" is repeated over 20 times in these very brief letters written by John. My assumption is that when you hear me talk about the "truth," you are thinking about the content of what we believe. That was an issue last week. John was praising the church for continuing in the truth and the truth was defined by what they believed about Jesus. As opposed to the false teachers, they believed that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of God. So when we talk about truth, that is part of it. The follower of Jesus is marked by the strong conviction that there is truth, and that truth is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. Why Jesus? Because He verified that He is indeed the Son of God by rising from the dead. The impression we need give to others is that we operate under the conviction that Jesus is indeed the truth. Is that not what Jesus Himself claimed in John 14:6 when He said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father except through me"*

But here is the challenge. When we claim to be people of the truth, we are not just talking about what we believe with our heads. I think that is the impression we often give. The message of the gospel itself can be offensive in our pluralistic culture because it is an exclusive message. That doesn't sit well. But it didn't sit well in the Roman Empire either. Did you know that in the Roman Empire, the early Christians were labeled as atheists? How could that be? It is because the Romans believed in a pantheon of gods, including the deifying of the emperor. So when Paul says in Romans 10, *"that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord"* and in verse 12 he says that Jesus is *"Lord of all"* that is a truth statement that flies in the face of a Roman culture that claimed Caesar was lord. This landed many Christians in the Coliseum as martyrs for the faith. The truth of the gospel always goes against the flow of culture. But the truth is more than a statement or a belief or a confession that one expresses.

When you read John and these three letters he has written, you see a phrase come up often that reminds you that truth is something that lives inside of us and it impacts our

lives. Often in these letters you read about people “*walking in the truth.*” He says in verse 4, “*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*” That statement means a variety of things. It means that the truth you believe is shaping how you live. It is not just a confession, but it is a way of life. If you hold to the truth of the gospel, it can’t help but humble you. Here is what John says in 1 John 6. “*If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.*” See, the truth changes us. He says two verses later, “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*” See walking in truth is more than just agreeing with the doctrine of Jesus the Son of God. Rather, the truth is holistic and it causes us to realize that we are sinful beings; and without Jesus Christ, we deserve the judgment of God, therefore . . . but by the grace of God, where would we be?

Are you shaped by the truth of the gospel? Do you give the impression that the truth of the gospel reigns in your life? Anyone can say, “I believe in Jesus.” Anyone can get up and confess their faith through the Apostle’s Creed. But is the truth inside of you, in the person of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and is it shaping your life? Here is how you can test that. Are you walking in the light? Are you humbled by your sin? Are you compassionate towards others? That is the truth inside of you, because it has a way of humbling you and giving you compassion for others because you realize that, without the grace of God, you have nothing. I know people who carry around a Bible and spout out verses left and right and you might have the impression that they are marked by the truth. But the real impression of truth comes through the activity of their lives and their compassion for others.

Over the past several years, I have referenced a book that has greatly shaped my thinking. The title of the book is *UnChristian*. This book is a study of what the younger generation thinks of the church and, more specifically, of the evangelical church. They don’t have a very favorable impression of the church in large measure because they don’t have a favorable impression of the people who make up the church. They see us as being too political and too judgmental and too hypocritical to name a few impressions they have of us. I am sure the state of our culture colors some of those impressions, but I am also convicted by these impressions because, in many ways, we have earned them. And I wonder if it is because we confine “truth” to what we believe in our heads and not in how we walk in our lives. The impression we are often leaving people is coloring their impression they have of God and, in the end, they are walking away from God.

This brings us to the second theme of John’s letters, and his gospel for that matter. It is the virtue of love. The evidence that God’s truth is in us is found in our love. And that love is a love of action. It moves us to give to others and to sacrifice for others. Why? Because that is what the “Truth” did for us. That is what Jesus did for us. If we want to

make an impression on our community for Christ, no doubt we need to share the “Truth” - that is Jesus - with them. But that truth is best communicated through deeds of love. Have you ever heard the expression, “actions speak louder than words?” I believe that is true and our actions will give an impression to others about the God we serve and believe.

GAIUS - SACRIFICIAL

So John writes this letter we call 3 John and in it he shares his impression of three men. The first impression he shares is his impression of the man he wrote the letter to. He wrote this letter to Gaius and he saw Gaius as a man who reflected the values he wrote about in the other two letters. Gaius was a living example of the principles he mentioned in the first two letters. He was a man of truth and love and that was seen in his willingness to sacrifice.

In the first four verses, John greets Gaius; and in his greeting he mentions the word “truth” four times. He concludes in verse 4 when he says, *“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”* If you were here last week, you know that was not anything that could be taken for granted because there were those who were once part of the church but have now gone out from the church because they no longer believed that Jesus was the Christ. But not Gaius. In the face of perhaps the trend of the church community, Gaius gave the impression that he holds fast to the truth of the gospel. In reading this letter, I even wonder if he did so against pressure to conform to those around him. We do know that Diotrephes was removing people from the church for doing what Gaius did, and yet he was a man driven by the truth and he was willing to sacrifice his own comfort for the sake of the truth.

This truth of Jesus that lived inside of him, was demonstrated in love. As these traveling missionaries came to town, Gaius, at his own expense, took them in and gave them lodging. I like how John describes the action of Gaius in verse 5. *“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.”* There was more to it than just opening his home to them. It required effort on his part, and his effort led to the praise of his love throughout the church. Out of love, he extended to them the gift of hospitality, and John said that, as a result, he was a *“fellow worker”* for the sake of the kingdom of God.

That is the impression the gospel makes on us and, as a result, we willingly sacrifice what we have for the good of others and the sake of the gospel. For some throughout the world, that means giving their lives. For others, that may mean sharing their resources, whether it be their possessions or their finances. For others, that means

giving time to those in need. When you sacrifice for others in the name of Jesus, you are giving an accurate impression of Jesus, who sacrificed his life on our behalf so that we can know God. Whatever the case, like Gaius, we pray that the impression we give to others is the impression of sacrifice and of love that point people to Jesus.

Can you think of a place in your life where you are making sacrifice and by your sacrifice, you are giving a positive impression of Jesus to this world?

DIOTROPHES - SELFISH

Diotrophes is a different story. Admittedly, what we know about these three men is confined to this short passage. So the only thing we know about Diotrophes is what we read in verses 9-10. It would be helpful if we had a few more details so we could understand better what John is upset about. Nonetheless, here is what we can put together from these two verses.

John had sent these traveling missionaries to this church, apparently run by Diotrophes. He seemed to be the leader of this house church somewhere in Asia Minor. For whatever reason, even after receiving a letter from the Apostle John commending these men to Diotrophes, he refused to acknowledge John's authority, he slandered John. In verse 10 John says that they are "*talking wicked nonsense against us.*" That is code for "gossip." And they he went so far as to remove people from the church who extended hospitality to these traveling missionaries. We are not sure why he did this. Some think that perhaps Diotrophes was part of the faction that John wrote about in 2 John, people who followed another teaching regarding Jesus and thus came under the condemnation of John. I doubt that is the case because John would have probably used stronger words to deal with him as he did in 2 John. Others think that at the heart of this issue was a struggle for power in the church. During the early stages of the church, one of the pressing questions was where the authority in the church rested. John was the last of the Apostles, and so some think that Diotrophes felt that John was overstepping his boundaries and felt that he had the right to govern his own affairs. It was possible we are talking church politics here.

Whatever the issue was, Diotrophes had made an impression on John and it wasn't a good one. Selfishly he allowed his issue with John to hinder the work of these traveling missionaries. Diotrophes seemed to be a personality that had control over the life of the church and, in the end, they were unable to do what they were called to do. They were stifled in their ability to be truth and love to their community.

How many churches are there that have a personality or two that get more caught up with the politics of the church and fail to remember the purpose of the church.

Sometimes that causes the church to make a bad impression on the community because it leads to strife and the news of that strife makes its way out into the community. But more often than not, sadly it causes a church to be irrelevant to the community. The church may occupy space in the community, but as far as the community is concerned, it is irrelevant. Being irrelevant is a sad place to be as a church because we were sent into the world to be relevant. We can't forget that the first beneficiary of the church is not those in the church. Instead, we occupy space on 511 Maple Street for the people who live around us.

A few years ago we asked the question, "Would it matter to the community if we ever closed our doors?" I think we have made strides in being relevant to the community by moving forward in unity and in purpose as we serve the needs of this community through love and acts of mercy. The truth of the gospel is something that touches people in real life, and when the spirit of Diotrophes sets in on a church, the church forgets why it is there in the first place. I praise God for the unity of this church from the leadership all the way down. And here we are on the cusp of making some bold moves as a church family and the focus is to position ourselves not so we can touch hundreds with the gospel, but thousands. I am grateful we don't have power struggles and this kind of division. Instead, we are busy reaching out. Praise God!

DEMETRIUS - SET THE EXAMPLE

Finally and briefly, I just mention the third person John mentions and it is Demetrius. We have less on him than we do the other two. Some think John mentioned him because he was the one who delivered the letter. Others think he was someone who was hurt by Diotrophes, perhaps put out from the church because of extending hospitality. Here is what I like about this man. He is the same wherever he goes. Everyone speaks highly of his testimony. He has set an example and he lives it out no matter where he is. May that be true of us. May we be like Demetrius whether we be in the home or the job or the church or the community. May we sacrifice for the sake of others so that the truth and love of Christ shines through us. Every day I pray that I would not be selfish because that is my tendency. I now have a name to put to it. "Lord, don't let the spirit of Diotrophes show up in my life today. Why? Because I want the truth and the love of Jesus to be seen by others in my life. Like Demetrius, I want Jesus to be seen in every area of my life.

CONCLUSION

What kind of impression are we making on others for the sake of Christ? If John were writing to this church, what would he write? What would you want him to write? I would want him to have the impression that the truth and the love of Jesus Christ would

be evident in the life of this church. I would want him to see a church that hasn't compromised on the message of the gospel, but at the same time is gaining favor with the community because we have been compelled by the love of God to love our neighbor as our self. I would hope that we would be filled with the spirit of Gaius and that the spirit of Diotrophes would be less and less. And, like Demetrius, this passion for truth and love would mark us wherever we go, because the truth of the matter is, we are the church and we take the church wherever we go. Let's be conscious tomorrow of the kind of impression we are making for Christ. He is, after all, the reason we live.

¹*The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2005) 22