

Scripture Truth



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Healthy churches

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The Lord's prayer for His own
The indwelling of the Holy Spirit

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A hard saying

“Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?” (John 10:34-36, KJV).

This passage is at first sight a difficult one. If you would understand it, note the context.

The Lord Jesus had just made a tremendous assertion in the hearing of these Jews, “I and My Father are one” (v.20). In these words He claimed not merely equality, but an absolute unity with the Father. At the conclusion of the argument He said, “... that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in Me and I in Him” (v.38); so that it is evident that He had not withdrawn from the claim He had just made.

When, however, the Jews thought to stone Him, saying to Him in justification of their attempted violence, “because that Thou, being a man, makest Thyself God,” the Lord met them upon the low ground which they had themselves chosen as the basis of their argument. Their law had spoken of the judges — those responsible to receive God’s word and administer it — as “gods” (Psalm 82:1, 6). If then those who represented God in so small and distant a degree were addressed as “gods” in the inspired writings, was He — set apart and sent into the world by the Father — a blasphemer because He said, “I am the Son of God”?

Such was His argument, meeting them from their own Scriptures in an irrefutable way, and thus answering those fools according to their folly (cp. Proverbs 26:5). Consequently, in the argument there is no assertion of His equality with the Father — that had just been asserted. On the other hand, there is in it nothing inconsistent with His equality. There is no withdrawing of His claims.

Rightly understood, therefore, there is nothing in those verses that in the least imperils the great truth of the Son’s equality with the Father.


From *Scripture Truth*, vol. 14 (1922), p. 168, probably by J.T. Mawson. Here abridged and slightly edited.

Worthy the Lamb!

Revelation 5:7-14

Donald Davison

*There is probably no praise in Scripture like
this praise!*


*The elder's
words
direct
John's gaze
inward
— to
the throne!*



Revelation chapter 4 displays the “rights of God in *creation*”; Revelation chapter 5 sets forth the “worth of the Lamb” in *redemption*. In the first six verses of chapter 5, studied in the previous issue of *Scripture Truth*,¹ we were introduced to a book in the hand of Him that sat on the throne, “written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals” (verse 1, KJV). This book has been described as containing the “title-deeds of the universe.” But when “a strong angel” issues the challenge, “Who is worthy to open the book and loose the seals thereof?” (v.2), and John gazes outwards, away from the throne, to find the answer, no-one — anywhere in the universe, seen and unseen, material and immaterial — can be identified as “worthy” to open it. But an elder can admit John to the secret. As an elder he is privy to the counsels of God (cp. Genesis 18:17 & John 15:15). It has been suggested that the number twenty-four indicates that the elders represent the saints of both dispensations who will have been raptured to glory. The elder’s words, that “The Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed,” direct John’s gaze inward — to the throne! There he sees this Lion as a Lamb “standing as slain.” His “worthiness” and strength are firstly in His death, and it is on account of that that He “stands”. But they are also in His Deity. He is not only the royal King of Israel — “the Lion of Judah”, but also the divine source of this royalty — “the Root of David”. And His seven horns and seven eyes set forth His omnipotence and His

¹ See *Scripture Truth* April, 2015, pp. 270-4.

omniscience, as well as (since these represent the seven Spirits sent forth) His omnipresence. In short, the attributes of Deity are in Him.

Verse 7. “And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him that sat upon the throne.” After the description of the Lamb in the previous verse our hearts instinctively respond with thanksgiving and praise. He, *and He alone*, because of who He is as King of Israel, and what He has done, and the way that He has done it at Calvary; because also of His essential Deity, His eternal relationship to God as the eternal Son — He alone is worthy! *He alone* is morally qualified to take, and capable of taking, this book out of the hand of God, and of beginning to administer all things in the universe to and for the glory of God.

Verses 8-10. As soon as the Lamb takes the book the four living creatures along with the four and twenty elders fall down before Him, “having each a harp and golden bowls full of incenses, which are the prayers of the saints” (Darby Trans.).

Someone has said there will be infinite variety, but one melody; perfect harmony and universal symphony in heaven. We recollect that in chapters 4 & 5 the elders are representative of the whole heavenly company that is already blessed and in the presence of the Lord. And here we find them in heavenly, harmonious concert, with harp, heart and voice taking up as their theme the needs of *others than themselves* — that is what “the golden bowls full of incenses, which are the prayers of the saints,” must signify. Indeed, those who are glorified have no “needs”; so these must be the prayers of those still in circumstances of need on earth — the prayers of those who now belong to God upon earth after our rapture, e.g. the remnant of Israel that will go through the great tribulation (see Daniel 12:1 with Psalm 74). Heaven is not uninterested in the affairs of God’s people after we have gone to glory.



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in heaven*



But, as today, prayers uttered on earth become incense in heaven and give substance for the new song (verse 9) led by the elders and ascending to the Lord. The elders do not sing of their own redemption, for they are already in glory. Their priestly service and song is on behalf of those faithful ones upon earth. Verse 10 is better translated as "...and hast redeemed [omitting the 'us'] to God by thy blood... made them to our God kings and priests; and they shall reign over the earth" (Darby Trans.). The "them" and "they" of this verse find their natural antecedents in "the saints" of the previous verse (8). As already said, the needs of those going through the great tribulation are taken account of by the redeemed company in heaven, and their prayers are presented to God in the bowls as sweet incense. And it is they whose reign on earth is celebrated at the end of this song.

The first song in Scripture was sung by redeemed Israel when they saw all their enemies dead upon the seashore (Exodus 15). How much louder yet sweeter, higher yet deeper, will be this new song reverberating through the vaults of heaven! This song, addressed to the Lamb, celebrates the worthiness of the Lamb to take the book and to loose the seven seals thereof, firstly because of who He is; secondly because of what He endured as slain and enduring the cross; and thirdly because of the great price of redemption — "His own blood".

Verses 11-12. The tide of praise increases as now "the voice of many angels" is added to those of the living creatures and the elders who express the worthiness of the Lamb. This adds up to an innumerable company of voices — "[lit.] myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." His Person and His work, that here are the theme of angels, form the basis of the unending theme of saints now; and they will occupy our praise and worship throughout eternity. To this worthy One, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain, is ascribed the fullest number of attributes by that vast company. Seven features of unlimited superiority or worth are listed:

- Power: infinite in itself and impossible to quantify;
- Riches: impossible to assess. 1 Corinthians 8:9 declares that He was "rich" from all eternity; here we read that He is "rich" to all eternity;
- Wisdom: ability to solve and resolve every issue;
- Strength: ability to exercise and sustain the will of God;
- Honour: every mark of distinction that can be conferred upon Him;
- Glory: excellence, intrinsic and displayed;
- Blessing: every moral feature that can be ascribed to Him.

It is impossible for human language to rightly and fully describe the worth, wonder and beauty of our adorable Lord. Throughout eternity it will be our

blessed portion to explore such features. “No jarring notes shall there discordant sound.”²

Verse 13. The tide of praise and worship flows still wider. The whole created universe ascribes “Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power... unto Him [God] that sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever”. The word for “power” is a different word from that in verse 12. It signifies “might”, or “the exercise of dominion”. I think we can see from this that all created beings and things throughout the unlimited extent of the new creation see and acknowledge that all ultimate power and authority are in the complete control of Him who sits upon the throne, and of the Lamb. Our Lord Jesus Christ will exercise these attributes of God for eternity without the possibility of cessation, diminution or change.

Verse 14. The four living creatures, who signify the attributes of God in creation, say, “Amen” — “So be it.” “And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped Him that liveth for ever and ever”. There are differences of opinion as to whether the “for ever and ever” at the end of verse 14 should be in the text. For myself I am happy to include it and commend it as given in the excellent KJV.

I think it good to end our study on chapters 4 & 5 on a note of true worship in the spirit of John 4:23-24. May we all be encouraged by these chapters, and by the glorious prospect that lies before us!

“The tide shall still roll on,
that tide of endless praise
till every creature to Thy throne
its voice in blessing raise.”³



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² J.G.Deck 1802-84.

³ C.Helena von Poseck (1859-1953).

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit

2. The practical implications

Stephen Thomson

This challenging article like its predecessor is based on a “Truth for Today” talk on Premier Radio (see www.truthfortoday.org).

Once the Lord Jesus had glorified God in respect of sin by shedding His most precious blood, God “raised him up from the dead and gave him glory” (1 Peter 1:21; cp. John 17:4,5). And once that had happened the Spirit was “given” (cp. John 7:39). The Holy Spirit had been active in the world prior to the cross, empowering mighty men of God and prophets. But the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension of Christ were necessary for the *Holy Spirit* actually to indwell still-failing, still-sinners, believers in Jesus. In this sense, the Holy Spirit was first “given” at Pentecost (Acts 2:3). The great fact of the Spirit’s indwelling of believers, both individually and also corporately as the church (John 14:17; Romans 8:9; Ephesians 2:22), depends on what Christ has done. These matters were the subject of the previous article.¹ They deserve our attention.

But what are the practical consequences, and the practical responsibilities, that devolve on us from the precious privilege of the Spirit’s indwelling?

The keeping power of the Holy Spirit

One very important effect of the indwelling Holy Spirit, brought out by the apostle John in his first epistle, is that, as children of God, we are able to discern what is truth and what is error (1 John 4:6). There is an instinctive refusal of what is not the truth by those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. “Ye have an unction [or, ‘anointing’] from the Holy One, and ye know all things” (1 John 2:20). This doesn’t mean that Christians are “know-all”! We all have a lot to learn! Its meaning is illustrated by something I recently read about a man who found himself in a crowd listening to the doctrine of one of the well-known sects. The speaker was pulling Christian beliefs to pieces and twisting Scriptures to make his argument, which was very persuasive. The listener had not been a Christian for very long and, concerned that he would be seduced by what was being said, another Christian was also listening. At the end of the meeting the second Christian approached the new believer. But the latter immediately gave his verdict, “Yes, that sure was some speech but there was a voice in my soul saying, ‘Lies! Lies! Lies!’ all the time he was speaking.” The

¹ See Stephen Thomson, “The Spirit’s indwelling. 1. The Bible’s teaching,” *Scripture Truth*, April 2015, pp. 265–9.

unction of the Holy Spirit that John talks about had enabled that young believer to resist wrong doctrine. We live in days when the doctrine of the Person of Christ is under constant attack. Thank God that even the youngest believer has the Holy Spirit and is able to know the truth!

Be filled with the Spirit!

But the effect of what God has done in giving His Holy Spirit to indwell us can only be one side of the matter. The other side must be our responsibility, given this great fact. What is the practical effect of this truth on the way we live?

We have already seen in the previous article that we are instructed to “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). It was pointed out that this does not involve our praying for “more of” the Holy Spirit — He indwells us already! — but rather praying for “less of *us*”, so that “the law of displacement” might operate, the Holy Spirit filling us as we make room for Him in our lives.

So how much *does* the Holy Spirit have of us? Are there parts of our lives which are closed to Him — no-go areas — or does He have full access? Do we limit Him, or does He control us? Perhaps we only need to look at Galatians 5:22-23 to see the beautiful effects of a Spirit-filled life. There we read, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness [or, kindness], goodness, faith [or, fidelity], meekness, temperance [or, self control].” These nine lovely attributes are spoken of collectively as the fruit of the Spirit and if we are under the control of the Holy Spirit these things will be seen in our lives.

I must confess to being a hopeless gardener. I would not be able to distinguish one tree or shrub from another in the winter time. However, when the summer comes and the flower or fruit appears, I would have a much better idea. If I see apples, I know that what I am looking at is an apple tree; if I



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have of us?*



*Do we
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saw plums, I would know that I was looking at a plum tree. You may be thinking, “Well that’s pretty obvious!” and so it is. And so it should be with us! In the case of the apple tree, the fruit is the evidence that the tree is an apple tree. The fruit of the Spirit, produced in our lives, gives the evidence that we belong to God, evidence that we have been born of God and are a new creation in Christ.

Perhaps we need to open our Bibles at Galatians 5:22-23 and quietly meditate on these things spoken of as the fruit of the Spirit. I believe that all these nine things are spoken of as “the fruit” and not *fruits*, to show that the Holy Spirit will produce all of these things in our lives — if we let Him. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples that the Father would be glorified in their bearing much fruit (John 15:8). Fruit is for God’s glory and pleasure, and isn’t it wonderful to see from these two passages just how closely the Persons of the Godhead — the Father, the Spirit and the Son — are at one in the desire to see fruit in the lives of believers! The opposite of these nine graces are seen all around us in the world today (Galatians 5:19-21), and so, as believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, we should so shine before men, that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

An often-sung hymn says of the Lord Jesus,

“Thy name encircles every grace,
That God as man could show;
There only could He fully trace
A life divine below.”²

What a perfect example to follow — One who displayed all these lovely features, often under the most testing of circumstances! How much do we measure up, I wonder? Bearing fruit is quite simply being like Jesus, and it is only possible by the power and under the control of the Person of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God.

Grieving and quenching the Spirit

The opposite of cultivating the fruit of the Spirit is grieving Him (Ephesians 4:30). The context tells us that an immoral manner of life, corrupt speech, dishonesty, and a “nursing” of anger will all grieve Him (4:22-29, 31). How can His life in us be evident if we allow these things in our lives? Strikingly, He will not desert us; He will not cease to be in us the seal of our redemption (v.29). But He cannot be active in such people.

As well as “grieving” the Holy Spirit we can also “quench” Him (1 Thessalonians 5:19). This could happen in our meetings as we gather

² Mary [Bowly] Peters, 1813-1856.

together. It is the Lord's desire that we meet together with fellow believers, but we need to consider the practical responsibility on us to ensure that the conditions are right as we do so. We often remember the Lord's promise to be in the midst of the two's or three's who gather together in His name (Matthew 18:20), and what a blessed privilege to know the presence of the Lord as we gather! But what a responsibility, too! Where the Spirit of the Lord is — there is liberty (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Perhaps the twofold thought is seen in these warnings, that individual unholiness may well grieve the Spirit, and our collective failures may well quench His operations amongst us as we gather.

Listen to what the apostle Paul says to the believers at Corinth as he sought to correct what was wrong in their gatherings. In 1 Corinthians 3: 16 he states, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" Later on, when he speaks to them individually concerning personal holiness, he says, "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you?" (1 Corinthians 6:19). The force of these words should not be lost on us today, both individually and also as we meet together with other believers.

But these Scriptures also surely teach us that by recognising the fact that the *Holy* Spirit indwells us we will be empowered to check these evils! How can people who realise what it means to have God Himself dwelling in them in all His holiness — God the Holy Spirit — possibly foster such behaviour in themselves? This is what Paul expected to have power in his readers' lives when he wrote 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19. It should have that power, because they are indwelt by Him. How important, then, for us daily to recollect this great fact! How dreadful to ignore it!

Holy priesthood — royal priesthood

A different angle on our corporate responsibility as "living stones" being built into "a spiritual house" is



*Individual
unholiness
may well
grieve the
Spirit*



*Our
collective
failures may
quench His
operations
amongst us
as we gather*




*The Spirit
and
the bride
say,
“Come”*



*What
a moment
that will be
when
our eyes
shall behold
Him
and not another!*



implied by Peter in his first epistle. He speaks in this connexion firstly of our being a “holy priesthood”, and secondly “a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5, 9). We are a “royal priesthood” so that, by “showing forth His praises” (v.9), we can meet the spiritual needs of those living round about us. But our first responsibility — and happy privilege — arises from our “holy priesthood.” This enables us to offer up “spiritual sacrifices...”, and is our service toward *God*. From our service toward God will flow out our service toward *man*. Recently I heard a brother in Christ speaking of the Christian life as being “Life with a capital ‘L’”. He pointed out that the first straight line in “L” is vertical — toward God — and the second was horizontal — toward man. Similarly, in John’s Gospel we have the living water — which is a picture of the indwelling, life-giving Holy Spirit in the life of a believer — springing up firstly to God in John 4; and secondly, in John 7:39, flowing out to man.

What the Spirit and the bride say

As I close I want just to bring one final point to your attention. In the last chapter of our Bibles we read that the Spirit and the bride say, “Come” (Revelation 22:17). I believe another effect of the indwelling Holy Spirit would be to create in our souls a longing to see the One who died for us at Calvary. What a moment that will be when our eyes shall behold Him and not another! (cp. Job 19:27)

“Face to face, oh blissful moment,
Face to face what will it be,
When with rapture I behold Him,
Jesus Christ who died for me.”³

The response of every believer indwelt of the Holy Spirit surely should be, “Even so, come Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

May God bless you all.

³ Carrie Ellis Breck 1855-1934.

The mustard seed

Iain Martin

Optimism and pessimism

Do you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist? We often answer this in relation to how we look at things. The one who sees the glass as half-full is considered an optimist; the one who sees it as half-empty a pessimist.

Bear this in mind as we consider the third of the seven “parables of the Kingdom” in Matthew 13.

Another parable He put forth to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (vv.31-32, NKJV).

I have heard this parable spoken about many times in many places with great glee, enthusiasm, and *optimism*. Glee, enthusiasm, and optimism are no bad thing in themselves, but it all depends whether or not they are warranted. Preachers preach glowingly of the greatness promised by this parable. They commence by fastening on the smallness of the mustard seed. This, they say, represents Christianity’s small beginnings. So far, so good. The man who planted it represents God. He planted the church as a tiny seed, and He planted it in the world. Also true. They proceed to argue from the parable that the church experienced great, exponential growth and became all-powerful. This is an undeniable fact of history.

And the birds nesting in its branches represent, they say, the happy prospect of all finding refuge there. “What a story!” they conclude, “What a promise! “What a future”!

Out of this heart-warmingly optimistic conclusion we see eager people running around changing the world for Christ (as they imagine), winning the world for Christ, chasing the idealistic dreams of securing world peace and ending poverty — all the sorts of activities that, in their view, will bring in the Kingdom. And all in the name of optimism.

Confronting reality

But is this really what the parable means? I want to look at these things again, and ask, “What does Scripture really tell us is going to happen? Let us first consider some other pertinent Scriptures.

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). The Lord Himself said that the effect of confessing His name (see vv.32-33) would not be the universal harmony that

many read out of the parable of the mustard seed, but opposition and division in the world.

“For you have the poor with you always” (Matthew 26:11). Undoubtedly the Christian is exhorted to relieve need (Psalm 41:1; Titus 3:14; James 2:2ff). But the Lord did not promise any end to poverty in this fallen world.

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

Is this the triumphalist vision of the future of the church that many conjure out of the parable of the mustard seed?

Rather, and just as God’s Word predicts, people in these last days are turning their ears away from the truth. The last century has witnessed the western world travelling far away from the faith that was once at least publicly professed. The Bible, that at one time was revered (at least publicly), is now mocked and indeed treated with suspicion; and its moral standards, that were once admired, are now condemned. Air-space is given to those who propagate the theory of evolution and denied to those who proclaim God’s truth about creation. And has the professing church resisted these apostate trends? On the contrary, it has generally travelled in the world’s wake. What the world innovates today, the professing church embraces tomorrow. In the Bible’s words,

“...They will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers, and they will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

“Diversity” is “the name of the game.” Do you deny the Trinity? Doubt the accuracy of Scripture? Disbelieve in hell? You are sure to find a church to accommodate you!

The parable in detail

What Paul wrote corresponds all too closely to what we observe. But where does that leave the parable of the mustard seed? Was Jesus wrong? Was there a fundamental flaw in His parable? Or did Matthew perhaps make it up, or change it and get it wrong?

*What the world innovates today,
the professing church embraces tomorrow*

None of these things. Quite simply, people have been wanting to read into the parable what isn't there.

Let's go back and consider it again. It has five elements, namely, the seed; the sower; the field; the tree; and the birds.

No-one, I think, will disagree that the sower is the Lord and the field is the world (cp. Matthew 13:38).

Nor does anyone disagree that by the mustard seed the Lord represents something small and insignificant. According to the learned Edersheim, even ancient rabbis used the likeness of the mustard seed in this way. Indeed Jesus himself so employed the comparison with the mustard seed in Matthew 17:20, when He said, "I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move..." In the parable, then, the mustard seed represents the tiny beginnings (in the world's eyes) of the kingdom of God. "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" asked Nathanael (John 1:46). "Not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called", was Paul's assessment of the results of his own preaching (1 Corinthians 1:26).

Certainly from something apparently small and insignificant great things can happen:

"A young teenager was walking to church in a blinding snowstorm. He was unable to get to his church, so he turned in to a little Methodist chapel. The storm was so severe that the preacher couldn't make it in that night, so a layman stood up to throw something together for a tiny group gathered. He spoke on just one verse from Isaiah, "Look unto me and be saved, all you ends of the earth!" And from that one little mustard seed on a most unlikely occasion, faith was planted in the heart of that teen boy for the first time... His name was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who later shook England for God, won thousands to Christ, and built a five-thousand-seat auditorium in his twenties, and yet it was never big enough to accommodate the crowds!"¹

Yet is this the Lord's real meaning in this parable?

The tree is where so many go wrong. They look to the tree as the wonderfully strong growth of the seed, claiming it represents the world-conquering success of the church. But does it?

A mustard seed normally produces a fair-sized bush, but not a tree. *This* mustard seed becomes something it was never intended to be. This interpretation flows seamlessly out of the previous two parables. In the parable of the sower only one type of ground out of four proved fruitful; in the wheat

¹ See <http://www.gbcdatur.org/sermons/MustardSeed.html>, to which the writer is indebted for various points in this article.

and the tares, half the field was weeds. Similarly with the “mustard seed”: the parable is about the disturbing, not the expectable, features that “the kingdom of heaven” turned out to exhibit. It is about something good that was planted, yet was permitted to become something that wasn’t quite what it seemed.

And that is what has happened over two thousand years with the church. The persecuted church of the first centuries was marked by astonishing devotedness and unworldliness; yet as its numbers increased exponentially, so veneration of relics, prayers to saints, the ascription of regeneration to baptism, etc., came in to obscure the gospel. The trend accelerated after 380 A.D. when the emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire (building upon the less formal privileging of the church by Constantine). The church rather than the Scriptures became the authority as to what was believed, and the gospel was submerged under what served the power of Rome over the minds of men. During the Reformation God used godly men to turn many back to the Scriptures, but by the nineteenth century Protestantism was growing ashamed of the authority of the Scriptures and of the gospel that they contain, as it fought to retain its power in state and society. (Increasingly it became ashamed of, and apologetic about, the Reformation too.)

Stating the same point differently: the parable speaks of the growth of what the world sees as the church. It doesn’t speak of the church that Christ claims as His bride, those who by grace, and through faith, are placed in Him, but of the lumbering machine that has presented itself down through the centuries as “the Church”, and still does to the world today. “Churchianity” is how I have heard it described, something that is so concerned with its own self-preservation and “image” in the world that it is all-embracing and lacking in discernment, and to that extent has lost its heart for the gospel of sins forgiven by a once crucified and now glorified Saviour.

I should state here that I believe in being friendly with those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ, even if we have different preferences, and we certainly should not decry everyone who “follows not with us” as exhibiting the features of the “great tree”. But we need to be wary of today’s movement which says, “Give up truth and dilute doctrines.” Christian unity is never supposed to be at the expense of truth.

So Christianity started out as a humble mustard seed, then organized religion took over, and it has become a monstrosity with many branches.

And in those branches are the birds.

If we turn back in the same chapter of Matthew to verses 3 & 4, we read, “Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the

wayside; and the birds came and devoured them....” And in verses 18 & 19, “Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart...”

So, then, according to Christ Himself, the birds represent the Wicked One. We can also recollect Revelation 18:2, “And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird” (KJV).

To sum up my discussion of the interpretation of the five elements of the parable identified above. There is no confusion regarding the interpretation of the Sower, the seed, and the field. But there is confusion regarding the tree and the birds. I hope I have shown that the tree represents a form that the kingdom of heaven took, which it ought not to have taken: a many-branched tree offering refuge to what is of the devil.

Am I a pessimist?

Returning, then, to the start of the article: am I merely a pessimist, while others are optimists? The definition given above tacitly assumes something about the liquid in the glass! Suppose it was milk that had curdled, but we had to drink it: would the person seeing it as half-empty be the pessimist — or the optimist? In my “parable” (!) the fact that half of the glass is devoid of liquid signifies that the parable of the mustard seed is not the whole of what the Lord had to say about “the mysteries of the kingdom”! The series of parables also includes the parable of the merchant seeking beautiful pearls. So let me leave you with the joy of it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-46, NKJV). *Jesus Christ* is the merchant. He sold all that He had, came to earth, and at the immeasurable cost of the cross He bought my salvation and made me part of His beautiful bride (Ephesians 5:25b-27). This parable also belongs to the seven-fold picture of “the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens.” So I consider myself very much the optimist in regarding the glass as half-empty! Amen.

*The parable of the mustard seed
is not the whole of what the Lord had to say
about “the mysteries of the kingdom”!*

The Lord's prayer for His own in John 17

David Anderson

There are few points in Scripture as high as John 17. This article unpacks many of its truths.

Of all the prayers found in Scripture, this prayer has a very special appeal to Christian believers. It was the conclusion of the “upper room discourse” that extends from John 13:31 to the end of chapter 16.

After Judas Iscariot had left (13:30), the Lord Jesus had explained to the eleven remaining apostles that He was going away from them. They were to be left behind in the world, whilst He returned to the Father. That news troubled them. But the promise of the Holy Spirit as another Comforter/Helper, and the instructions about how they were to live in these new circumstances, had reassured them. Then, in chapter 17, the Lord showed that He did really care about them by praying specifically for them. Therefore this unique prayer is often called “the high-priestly prayer of intercession.”

“His Own”

In verse 6 the Lord identifies those for whom He was praying as “the people whom [the Father] had given [Him] out of the world” (the world being the entire system of mankind alienated from God). As such they were the Father’s possession according to His eternal purpose and by His sovereign choice. In 5:20 Jesus had spoken of His eternal relationship with the Father, when He said, “The Father loves the Son” (cp. 3:35). But the amazing fact is that the Father considers believers to be a suitable gift to *demonstrate* His love for His Son! And the fact that the Son values us as a special love-gift from His Father is expressed by the repetition of “you gave them to me” in verses 2, 6, 9 & 24 of chapter 17 (ESV), and in “they were yours” in verse 6. But notice the amazing breathings of divine love in verses 9-10 (KJV), “For they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them”! These are the people who in John 13:1 are called “His own.”

Furthermore the Lord claims that “His own” would be the means by which He would be glorified in the world which had rejected Him. The Son had taken special care of them whilst with them in the world. He, the Sent One, had shown them the Father’s Name. By revealing the name of “Father”, He had made known to them the eternal relationships within the Godhead. The true nature of God was seen in their Master’s deeds (v.4); and declared by His words (v.26). They had kept and treasured these words of the Father (v.6). The Son

had explained the Father's will to them (vv.8 & 14). They also had come to understand the Father as the source of all things that the Son possessed; and to believe that He came from the Father's presence (v.8).

In verse 20 the Lord groups together the apostles and everyone who believes in Him as a result of their testimony. Therefore the phrase "His own" embraces every believer, from Pentecost to the Rapture. They are "His brethren". No wonder 13:1 states that He loves them and always will — unto the end (or the uttermost), that is, through everything in this life upon earth and into eternity!

Verses 1-5: The Lord asked for Himself

The Lord's very first word in the prayer of John 17 is "Father" — that hallowed Name of God revealed by the Son. As Son in the Godhead, the Lord can speak with the Father on equal terms. He appropriately said, "Father", without even an adjective being necessary! The hour had come for Him. Several times in this Gospel John had already used the concept of "His hour" to signify His departure from the world to the Father, notably in 13:1. Here, at the outset of His prayer, He clarifies that the hour had come for Him to be glorified. He asked for His own glorification so that He could then glorify the Father by giving eternal life to Christian believers — "that the Son may glorify you." "To glorify" is "to cause the excellencies of a person to be displayed", that is, to be seen and to be understood by others.

As in all things, He only sought the glory of His Father. "I have glorified it," had been the answer from heaven to the Lord's petition of 12:28, "Father, glorify your name." This answer had referred to the raising of Lazarus in the previous chapter.

But the heavenly voice had continued, "I will glorify it again." This was answered when God raised Him from among the dead and gave Him glory (1 Peter 1:21). Yes, He was raised by the glory of the Father (Romans 6:4) and taken up / received up in glory (1 Timothy 3:16). There He is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in



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from
His Father*



heaven (Hebrews 8:1); and there the glory of God shines in His face (2 Corinthians 4:6). Now glorified, the Father authorises Him to give eternal life to believers. In doing this new work, He glorifies the Father in a new way (John 17:2). The glorification of the Son brings about the glorification of the Father.

Verse 3 defines eternal life as being to know the Father, the only true God and Jesus Christ, the Sent One of the Father. From our side we are relieved to find that eternal life is the opposite of perishing and of condemnation (3:16-18). But from His side God wants us to share in His life, that is, in the family life of God in eternity. In John's Gospel the adjective "true" means the ultimate reality of a thing. For example, Jesus is the "true bread" from heaven in chapter 6 and the "true vine" in chapter 15. "The true God" conveys the thought of finality in the progressive process of the revelation of God. Now God is known as He really is in His nature. "God is love" (1 John 4:16). "The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has [fully] declared Him" (John 1:18, NKJV). As the children of God believers have a real, living relationship with the Father through His Son (1 John 5:20).

Jesus continued in verse 4 of His prayer, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (ESV). Here He already anticipated the next day, when He would triumphantly say, "It is finished" (John 19:30). He had already said that God had been glorified in Himself as the Son of Man (13:31). The Father was glorified in every aspect of Christ's life upon earth; and supremely in His death, resurrection and ascension. Here, in 17:6, 8 & 14, Jesus outlined the ways in which He had glorified His Father: He had explained the meaning of the name of "Father"; and He had given the Father's words to the disciples.

In verse 5 He spells out His initial request in verse 1 to be glorified. "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." As the Son, He rightly requests to be re-invested with the uncreated glory of Deity, which He had along with the Father in eternity "past". At His incarnation that glory had been veiled, but not divested. But notice He received this glory as He now is — the risen Man in the presence of the Father! Notice, too, that Jesus speaks in the first person, "Me" and "I" — as an equal. The phrases, "in your own presence" and "with you" mean "together with yourself" or "alongside you", in a shared position of equal status. The expression "before the world existed" confirms Jesus is the eternal Son from before the incarnation, even before the ages began!

Verses 6-19: the Lord prayed for the apostles

He was now leaving His chosen followers behind in the world. His concern for their well-being was expressed in His words in verse 11, "I am no longer in the world but these are in the world, and I am coming to you." They were going to lose the protection of His presence with them: "While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves" (vv.12-13). Additionally, He underlined in verse 14 the continuing hatred they would face from the world because, like Him, they are "not of the world."

With these thoughts upon His mind, the Lord Jesus made "His own" the focus of His prayer. "I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours" (v.9). He was confident that the outcome of their witness to Him would be that His name would be magnified. "I am glorified in them" (v.10). In verses 11-12 He asked for their safety as they served Him in the world: that they would be preserved, that is, kept in the good of the Father's Name. Throughout chapters 13-17 the name "Father" is the central theme of the Lord's teaching about His disciples' new relationship with God. Twice over in chapter 17, in verses 11 and 12, He refers to the Name "Father" as the Name He had been especially given to make known to His own. To be "kept in the Name" of the Father is to be in the knowledge, the understanding, and the benefit of its meaning. Our blessings find their source in the Father's love and are expressed in what He does in/through His Son — read 3:16-21 & 35-36, 4:21-24, 5:17-29, 6:27-40 & 44-51, 10:17-18 & 27-30.

According to 1 John 2:15-17 the world is the antithesis to the Father. John warns that if we love the world we will not have the Father's love within us; and we will miss out on the real family life of God. In John 17 there are nineteen occurrences of the word "world"; this emphasises the Lord's awareness of the threats that the world poses to believers. Verses 11, 14 & 15 show the Lord's concern about this. Therefore He calls



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His Father “holy Father” in verse 11. Jesus was conscious that He was leaving His own behind in a hostile and evil world which would hate them because it hated both Him and His Father — see 15:18-25.

In 17:13 He prayed about this situation whilst still with them in the world so that afterwards they could be completely full of His joy. Then in verses 14-15 He sought their protection from the evil in the world, and from its ruler, the evil one. In verses 16-18 He stated that this necessitated their sanctification — i.e., their being practically separated to the Father by obeying His Word, which is truth. They were to be sent into the world, just as He was sent by the Father (v.18). That required a particular and special action of the Lord. “For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth” (v.19, NKJV). He has set Himself apart for believers in heaven as their High Priest to enable them to be holy in lifestyle. And verse 19 is the assurance that the Lord continues to intercede for us even now (today!) in heaven and it's the reason why chapter 17 is called His “high-priestly prayer”.

Verses 20-26: the Lord prayed for all Christian believers

I have already noted that the Lord Jesus embraced in this prayer everyone who believes the gospel throughout this entire dispensation. Both the apostles, and all who have responded by faith to the preaching and teaching that they began, are included in verse 20.

The spiritual unity prayed for in verse 21 is that fundamental, essential unity of family life derived from the Father and the Son. In Ephesians 4:3 it is called the unity of the Spirit, which was formed at Pentecost; and it is already referred to in verse 11 of John 17. This unity was actually manifested to the world by the church in the Acts of the Apostles. In John 17:21 the Lord asked that such a witness would cause the world to believe that the Father sent the Son. To achieve this objective, the Lord stated in verse 22 that He has given believers the glory bestowed upon Him by the Father. This “bestowed glory” is His glory as the Son of Man now glorified at God's right hand. When the perfect unity of verses 21-23 is achieved in the coming day of glory, the Son's fulness will be displayed in His saints. The world will then realise that the Father loves believers as He loves His Son. Additionally, it will then acknowledge that the Father did indeed send His Son into the world.


At verse 24 the prayer changes. “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world” (KJV). “I will” is a strong expression meaning “I demand by my own right.” But His demand is based upon the divine relationship, “for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.” The Son demanded/required that His own be “with

me where I am". From 14:2-3 we understand this to be in the Father's house, which is heaven. There, in "the saints' eternal home", they will behold His glory. His excellence will fill the new heavens and the new earth. The glory displayed will be the pre-eminent glory of the Son. It will include that glory which the apostles beheld in 1:14 & 18, the glory of the only-begotten Son, who dwells in the bosom of the Father! For believers, it will be the full realisation of eternal life and the everlasting enjoyment of that family life of God!

In verses 25-26 the Lord concluded His prayer by summarising His ministry to His own, which, He says, continues — even today. He addressed the Father as "righteous Father" when He thought of the fact that the world is wilfully ignorant of the true God. The world proved to be unrighteous when it rejected God's Sent One: see 16:10. By contrast, believers do know the Father because they have been given divine insight to appreciate the unique glory of the Son of His love — that He came from His Father's side. The special work of the Son was to declare the Father's Name to His own; and in verse 26 He said that He has done this. But in 20:17 the message on the resurrection morning, that Mary was to carry to the disciples, was, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (ESV). By the Spirit, they became fully aware of their true relationship with the Father from that time onwards.

The Lord continues to make the Father's name known to His own throughout the Christian era. This is the basis of true worship, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee" (Hebrews 2:12, KJV). This worship arises from the ongoing appreciation that believers have of the Father's love. It is the very same love which He has for His Son! Yes, there is no spiritual experience greater than to participate in the family life of God. This is the essence of Christianity — eternal life, known and enjoyed even now upon earth!

I conclude this article by making the observation that the Lord Jesus Christ never prayed for anything which was not in keeping with His Father's will. Therefore, we are guaranteed that all that He has prayed in this prayer for His own has been, is, and will be, answered by the Father.


*The
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Amazing Grace!

Theo Balderston

The most famous verse in the Bible begins with a “For”:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, ESV).

The “For” tells us that John 3:16 gives the reason for the previous two verses:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Rome roughly nailed its serious convicts and rebels to wooden crosses that were then elevated so as to maximise the number of onlookers that could gloat over their lingering, torturing deaths. Thereby the Roman state intended to show that it had not even a trace of respect for them. Crucifixion was not elevation to a throne but to the utmost indignity and shame. It was also designed as the ultimate deterrent. “Defy Rome, and nothing will deliver you from its brutal power,” was the intended message. The chief priests contrived it so that the Lord’s kingly claims (that evidently unnerved them) should be demolished - only they didn’t quite manage this (John 19:21f).

No-one would have invented the story of God’s only Son dying in such a manner. But God ordained (Acts 2:23) that “the Son of man” who had descended out of heaven should be perversely “elevated” again as being the most despicable of men (Isaiah 53:3). And John 3:16, beginning with its “For”, explains *why*. God did this only because He “so loved” the world.” “The world” deserved judgment and wrath (3:17f, 36). How straightforward it would have been for God to have consigned it to the judgment that His own holiness necessitated! He could not do it: such was His love that He offered it “salvation” at the unavoidable cost of the suffering, degradation, and shame of His very own, His beloved Son. Unless the salvation cost God all that He could give, “the world” could not be offered it.

But if we think further about Moses’s “lifting up” of the serpent in the wilderness we learn yet more about the love of God. Moses was instructed to “set it upon a standard” (Numbers 21:8, RV) *so that all the Israelites* should have the opportunity to see it, and live (Numbers 21:8f), i.e., be healed of their

*Unless the salvation cost God all that He could give,
“the world” could not be offered it.*

deadly snake bites. This is in itself a lovely evidence of the grace of God. And so God had His own Son “lifted up” so that “all” could see Him — not Israelites only, but the entire “world”. Standards were set up as rallying-points for troops. “I, if I be lifted up from the earth,” says the Lord later on, “will draw all unto me” (John 12:32). There is a universality about the cross that is capable of drawing “all”. Its message is simple and plain enough for “all” — of whatever epoch of history or culture or social status — to grasp. It can surmount every human boundary. If some purport to believe that God eternally is love, yet refuse to believe that therefore He must have had One to love in the timelessness of eternity — His beloved Son — and that firstly He gave that Son to become flesh, and then gave Him up to a cross, it is their refusal, not some limitation of God’s capacity to draw “all” to His uplifted Son, that excludes them from its saving power.

Secondly the incident of the fiery serpents happened very late in Israel’s wilderness wanderings. How much they had tried God during their thirty-eight years or so of wandering — from Marah (Exodus 15:24) to the rebellion of Korah and his supporters (Numbers 16)! And now the LORD had caused them to win their first campaign towards gaining the promised land (Numbers 21:1-3). But still they complained that Moses had brought them to die in the wilderness (v.5)! Yet, even then, God provided the deliverance of the elevated bronze serpent that all could see.

The Lord Jesus was “lifted up” on a cross after a vastly longer history of Israel’s heart-estrangement from their covenant-God. Truly it was “grace upon grace”, or, as it might be translated, “grace instead of grace” (John 1:16). The grace by which God continued with Israel after Sinai was always a softening of the Law. Much people had already died due to the fiery serpents God had sent (Numbers 21:6). But in Christ there was no judgment (John 3:17).

Finally: to benefit from the bronze serpent each individual had to “look”. All could see it; each had to look for him- or herself. But *only* look, nothing more. There was no other episode in the wilderness that so clearly set forth “by faith alone”. Correspondingly the Lord’s words in John 3:15-16 are both individualising and requiring of faith alone — the wonderful words, “*whoever believes on Him*”.

The grace after Sinai was always a softening of the Law. But in Christ there was no judgment.

Healthy churches

Reflections on 3 John: affection and hospitality

David Hughes

When we studied 2 John I gave it the title, “healthy families.” By contrast, I wish to give this study of 3 John the title “healthy churches.” There is a little phrase that occurs in both letters — “walk in truth”. 2 John teaches us about walking in truth in our families, whilst 3 John talks about walking in truth in our churches.

It’s crucial that we walk in the truth in our families. It’s equally important that we walk in truth in our churches. So, as we go through the verses, let’s challenge ourselves as to what we think about the assembly we attend. Would we say we are part of a healthy assembly? Do we think we have problems? Are all the problems with other people or could we be the cause of some of the problems? Let’s read what John has to say in this letter and let it help us to ensure that we do all we can to be part of a healthy assembly.

As we look through this letter-postcard to Gaius I want us in this article to notice two features of healthy churches. In verses 1-4 notice that healthy churches care about each other, and in verses 5-8 notice that healthy churches care about hospitality. Then in a second article we’ll notice that verses 9-11 remind us that healthy churches avoid sectarianism whilst verses 11-12 teach us that healthy churches follow good examples. Finally in verses 13 and 14 we will see that healthy churches care about the global church.

Healthy churches care about each other

Let’s jump into the verses then, starting with the first four. We start off by being told that John is writing to a man called Gaius. Did you notice the obvious affection that John has for this man? He is called the “beloved Gaius” in verse one, whilst verse two starts “Beloved” (NKJV). John states at the end of verse one that he loves Gaius “in truth”. This is a challenge right at the start of this letter as to how I view other believers. Could I really say that I view them with the same kind of affection as John has for Gaius? I think we avoid expressing this kind of brotherly affection these days for fear of being misinterpreted, and others thinking wrong of it. But when we consider that later in this short letter John is going to help Gaius to deal with some serious problems with Diotrephes, who was trying to dominate in the church, perhaps it’s significant that John starts by modelling how brothers should get along with each other. If Gaius was to view problematic individuals as “beloved”, and really love them, then maybe that would help in dealing with any of the problems. I wonder how

many problems in our own church histories would have been avoided if brothers and sisters had made a more determined effort to love each other in truth? But I need to apply this to myself now, not just believers in the past. How much of an effort do I make to love other brothers and sisters in the truth? Do I think of the other believers in my assembly as beloved? Would they be able to tell that from how I act?

In verse 2 John says that he prays for Gaius. What a good example for us to follow! How many of our brothers and sisters do I pray for? John was able to rejoice because he could see that Gaius's soul was prospering. He had heard from other believers that Gaius was living out the truth that he said he believed. He not only believed the truth but he lived it. He walked in the truth. We have cause for celebration and rejoicing if we see other believers walking in the truth and growing spiritually. So I have to ask myself, do I rejoice to see spiritual progress in others? Maybe too often I could be jealous, or too quick to assume some ulterior motives in their actions, rather than simply assuming they were growing to be more like Christ. Reading these verses reminded me to look for spiritual growth in others, and thank God for it, and rejoice in it! Spiritual life is no competition!

But did you notice *what* John prays for Gaius? If you look in verse 2, you will see that he prays, "That you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers." John had heard that Gaius was prospering spiritually. But he didn't really pray about this. Instead he prays that Gaius would prosper in all areas of his life as much as he prospered in his spiritual walk with the Lord. Don't you think that's interesting? I was quite shocked to see this. It's probably fairly common for us to pray for spiritual growth in other believers. We might often pray for believers who are sick. But I don't often remember, in my own life or in public prayer meetings, praying for each other that we will all prosper in all things.




*It's
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in
our families*



*It's
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We need to be clear. The Bible never teaches any kind of prosperity gospel. It simply isn't true that if I become a Christian then God will make me healthy, wealthy, and wise. In fact it's often true that the Christian life is one of suffering and struggle. John is not teaching a prosperity gospel. Instead he is acknowledging that all good gifts come from God, and is praying that God will bless other believers with many good gifts. I think I have maybe avoided praying too much for the prosperity of other believers thinking I was being spiritual. I was praying for their spiritual growth which was, of course, far more important. Wasn't I being spiritual by paying no attention to physical things? Is anyone else sometimes like that?

But John wasn't like that! Of course John would have prayed for the spiritual prosperity of the believers he knew. But here he had no qualms about praying for Gaius to prosper in all things. How often do I pray, "Lord, I pray that John will be really healthy"? "Lord, I pray that George will get that promotion at work", "Lord, I pray that Sally's children will do really well at school", "Lord I pray the Jones' kids would sleep well at night so that the parents can get a rest"? Of course I wouldn't want any of these prayers answered at the expense of the prosperity of their souls. So we always have to pray the two prayers in tandem — as John did.

Could I pray for some brother to really prosper without being jealous if God gave it to him? Do you know what the Bible has to say about this kind of attitude? It says it's exactly the kind of behavior that ungodly, unsaved people show! Paul writes to Titus, "For we ourselves were also once foolish... living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another" (3:3). A jealous attitude towards other believers' prosperity is acting like an unsaved person. But that's not how I should act now! Paul goes on to remind us that the "kindness and love of God our Saviour" appeared and "according to His mercy He saved us" and renewed us. If we are saved God has changed us! No place any more

for hateful attitudes and envy and malice! Healthy churches care about each other.

Healthy churches care about hospitality

Gaius, again called “beloved” in verse 5, is well-known for the way in which he serves the saints. In fact some of the believers whom Gaius had helped had told John about how kind he had been to them and the love they had been shown. Gaius had taken Christians into his home, and fed them and sent them on their journey with supplies and probably money. In those days they didn’t have hotels for visiting evangelists and teachers to stay in, so they would have stayed in the home of some of the believers in the assembly. Gaius did this work faithfully. When they left the town, they would need food for the journey as they didn’t have Costa service stations to pull in at. This would need to be provided for them by the believers. Gaius was known for faithfully doing this work. Interestingly we don’t read about Gaius as a preacher or teacher. Of course he may have been. We don’t read about him as a gifted personal evangelist — although, again, he could have been. We read that he was known for his hospitality. How many of us would that be true of? Is my house one where the saints know they are welcome? If some of the Lord’s servants are in need would I be someone they knew they could rely on for help?

Gaius’s help was not limited to those believers he knew well in his own assembly. When John mentions “strangers” in verse 5, I think the idea is Christian visitors from other places who would be unknown in the area. He served them and helped them not because he knew them well, they were his friends, and he liked them. No! He served them simply because they were the Lord’s servants and it was right to receive them. Just to be practical for a moment. If on Sunday morning a visitor was to come into your assembly, how many would think to ask if they would like to come back for lunch? Would I think to ask if they would like to have a cup of tea at my house after the evening service? If they were staying in the area for a while would I think about inviting them for a meal one evening in the week? Not because I know them well and like them (although clearly these are good things to do for people we know well and like as well). Simply because they are Christians.

For some reason our homes have become incredibly personal things and we don’t like to invite people to share in them. If we do, we seem to want to do it in a very controlled way so that we only let visitors have some small glimpse of our home-lives. I’m not sure why we think like that sometimes. Perhaps I want to keep up an appearance. Perhaps I worry too much that people will think I don’t have fancy food, or my house is too messy. I don’t get the impression Gaius was like that. I’m sure he must have had visitors who were a bit of an imposition sometimes and he was glad when they left, but Gaius seems to have

been a man who welcomed people to his home. When they left the town he made sure they had enough supplies for the journey.

You might remember that when we thought about 2 John we noticed that the Christian lady was told to be very careful about who she allowed into her home. There were false teachers who were ready to take advantage of the believers' generosity and lead them astray. John warned the elect lady not to let anyone into her home who taught heretical things about who Jesus was. 3 John provides a helpful balance to this. It was only the false teachers that a Christian must not let into their home. This wasn't a reason for refusing fellowship to anyone who disagreed with you. John commends Gaius for his hospitality, and the way he served the saints in love.

Gaius's service for the saints was characterized by faithfulness in verse 5 and love in verse 6. We've thought a little bit about those features. Did you notice in verse 6 how John describes Gaius's service? "In a manner worthy of God". That is a good phrase to characterize all our service for God. When I show love to the saints, do I do it in a manner that is worthy of God? I think John is emphasizing that although Gaius was showing love to individual believers he was actually doing it as if he were doing it for God Himself. I wonder how my actions would change if I kept in mind that when I do something for another believer I should do it as if I were doing it for God Himself. Do I care for my family, for the believers in my church in a manner worthy of God? I don't think that this means that I can only have people round for a meal if I provide a five-star, gourmet menu, or I have an immaculate house. "A manner worthy of God" does not imply luxury. Rather it means that I serve food prepared lovingly not grudgingly, I offer a bed sacrificially, I offer money cheerfully, etc. Don't let inability as a cook, or quality of house prevent you from serving the saints in love! Jesus says in Matthew 25:35f that people who take in strangers, help hungry and thirsty people, and offer clothes to those who have none, are really giving those things to Him. Jesus notices. He even notices a cup of water given in His name (10:42). That gives a whole new dimension to my service. Do I act in a manner worthy of God?

So to finish this article let's notice John's message in verse 8: "we ought to receive such". If someone is serving for His name's sake (v.7) then I ought to receive them and show them Christian kindness. It's an obligation. I ought to support them; not, "I can support them if I feel like it"! These believers are offering themselves up in service for Christ. I should do all I can to help them. In doing so I become a fellow-worker for the truth.

Healthy churches care about hospitality. Are you looking for ways in which you can show hospitality and kindness to the believers you know?

"When I left Sydney in 1946 as an idealistic 25 year-old with fresh nursing and midwifery qualifications, heading for the mission field in Belgian Congo, little did I know what lay before me. Perhaps it was just as well! But as I now look back after some 18 separate visits spread over 60 years, I can only thank my Lord for all that he has brought me through."

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God's peace

Isaiah 11:6-7

Upon the field where summer's rain
Has stained the grass so green;
The lion and the lamb lie down
And peace – God's peace is seen.

Oh, see the leopard with the kid!
The cow and bear as one!
And know a child shall lead them on
Where peace – God's peace is won!

Then hear Creation shout with joy
As God's own sons are shown.
And see the glory of His grace
Where peace – God's peace is known.

A righteous sceptre rules the scene;
The King is on His throne.
'Tis Shiloh, by His precious blood,
Brings peace – God's peace, alone.

G.E. Stevens, *A First Hymn a Day* (Ipswich, Mathetes Publishing, 2012), p. 32
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