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THE PROSPEROUS SOUL

3 John 1-15

By

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July 16, 2006
3 John Lesson 1

The Prosperous Soul 3 John 1-15

In 1987, Marla and I had the privilege of traveling to Hong Kong, Macau, and China for ministry. In Macau, we were visiting with some missionaries and through their translation, talking with two courageous young Chinese women who slipped across the border into China each week. From there they mailed dozens of Bible correspondence courses. If they had been caught, they would have been imprisoned.

I asked these young women if they had ever heard of the “health and wealth” or “prosperity” teaching. They had not. When I explained to them that some in America were teaching that it is God’s will for all of His children to be healthy and wealthy, these young women shook their heads and laughed softly. They said, “I don’t think that Christians in China would fall for that!”

But many American Christians and now many in other countries have fallen for this unbiblical teaching. One of the main texts used to support it is 3 John 2, “Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.” Ignoring the fact that the apostles and many Old Testament prophets, not to mention Jesus Himself, were poor and persecuted, the proponents of this false teaching brazenly appeal to the greed and selfishness of their spiritually naïve audiences.

They are those of whom Paul wrote (1 Tim. 6:5), “who suppose that godliness is a means of gain” (see also, 2 Pet. 2:14-15). If these false teachers would bother to read 3 John 2 carefully, they would see that it really pronounces a curse, not a blessing, on them!

John is praying for his friend, Gaius, that he would prosper and be in good physical health to the same degree as his soul actually was prospering. It’s worth pondering, if someone prayed that for you, would it be a blessing or would we need to call the paramedics? At the very least, it’s dangerous when a Christian’s material prosperity gets ahead of his spiritual prosperity. Paul warned (1 Tim. 6:9-10), “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation

and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

The apostle John said (v. 4), "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth" (*not*, "prospering financially"). He was talking about his spiritual children, of course. But, Christian parents should be able to say about their children, that their greatest joy is to hear that their children are walking in the truth. Sadly, I've known of Christian parents who are ecstatic when their children land top-paying jobs, but they don't seem to be as happy if the kids decide to be missionaries. Our main prayer for our children and for every Christian should be that they have prosperous souls. John describes for us here the prosperous soul:

The prosperous soul walks in the truth and love, submits to apostolic authority, and imitates godly examples.

Like 2 John, this one-page letter was written from "the elder," whom conservative scholars agree is the aged apostle John. Unlike 2 John, which I believe was written to a local church, 3 John is written to an individual, Gaius. We know nothing about this man (or the other two individuals mentioned in this letter) except what we learn here. He was a faithful Christian leader in a local church that was under the care of the apostle John.

In this church, a self-willed, power-hungry man, Diotrephes, had grabbed power. He openly attacked the authority of the apostle John, he denied hospitality to traveling Christian workers, and he even excommunicated those who defied him by offering hospitality to these workers.

Gaius, however, to this point had resisted the strong-armed tactics of Diotrephes. He had given hospitality and financial support to these traveling missionaries. John encourages Gaius to continue doing so, and he commends to him Demetrius, who was probably the bearer of this letter. John assures Gaius that he will deal publicly with Diotrephes when he visits the church in the near future. I'm sure that it would have been interesting to have a box seat to watch the fireworks when that happened!

The three characters named in the book provide us with three keys to pursuing a prosperous soul:

1. The prosperous soul walks in the truth and love (Gaius, the beloved example, 1-8).

As in all of John's writings, truth is a central concept in 3 John. He mentions it in verses 1, 3 (twice), 4, 8, and 12, plus the word "true" in verse 12. As we've seen, John's greatest joy was to hear of his spiritual children walking in the truth.

Why did the aged apostle hammer on the truth so often? One reason was that he was the last living apostle, and he saw numerous errors creeping into the churches. Also, the Lord Jesus had repeatedly emphasized the truth in His earthly ministry. In John 1:14 (see also, 1:17), John testified that Jesus was "full of grace and truth." In John 3:21, "he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God." In John 4:23 & 24, Jesus explained that the Father seeks those who "worship in spirit and truth." In John 8:32, Jesus said, "and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." In John 14:6, Jesus claimed, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). He prayed (John 17:17), "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." Jesus told the skeptical Pilate (John 18:37), "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

So truth was a huge emphasis in Jesus' ministry, and therefore, too, in the life and ministry of the apostle John. Contrary to the current postmodern philosophy that denies absolute truth in the spiritual realm, the Bible clearly affirms that there is theological and moral truth and error. This truth centers in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is the God of truth in human flesh. Since God is the author of truth, whereas Satan is the author of spiritual lies (John 8:44), God's people must know and obey the truth as revealed in God's Word.

Gaius prospered in his soul because he walked in the truth (v. 3). Also, those who had visited Gaius reported back to John of Gaius' love before the church (v. 6). As we've seen, truth and love

must always go together. Gaius' good example teaches us four things about these essential virtues, truth and love:

A. To walk in the truth implies knowing the truth.

Gaius didn't accidentally stumble onto the path called "truth" and just as accidentally stay on it. No one in this world under the dominion of the father of lies and deceit, walks in the truth accidentally. It requires deliberate purpose and effort, both to understand the truth and to walk in it.

The huge emphasis on truth in John's writings teaches us that *truth matters!* How a person thinks about God, man, salvation, and life determines how that person lives. A person with false concepts in these areas will live differently than the person with a biblical view in these important matters. Since Jesus Himself is the truth and since God's Word is truth, Satan works overtime to undermine the truth about the person and work of Christ and the truth of God's inerrant Word.

But there is an inherent danger as we grow in our knowledge of the truth. Paul said (1 Cor. 8:1), "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (my translation). If Satan can't prevent us from knowing the truth, then he tries to get us puffed up with pride over how much we know that others don't know. We would be wrong to conclude that we should remain ignorant so that we can stay humble! But, we should always remember that anything we know of the truth is only because of God's grace. If He had not been gracious, we would still be in spiritual darkness.

B. To walk in the truth implies growth in the truth.

Twice (vv. 3, 4) John mentions "walking in the truth." He does not say that we should sit and rest in the truth, but rather that we should *walk* in it. Walking implies steady movement in a purposeful direction. It requires discipline and effort. Walking is not as quick as running, but if you keep at it, walking will get you where you're going. After warning about the danger of being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, Peter commands us (2 Pet. 3:18), "but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." You will not grow in the knowledge of Christ by accident! You must purpose to walk in the truth, studying to learn and then apply God's truth to your daily life.

C. Growth in the truth should always result in love.

As we've seen, truth and love are not opposed to one another. John affirms (v. 1) that he loves Gaius in truth, which means, in the sphere of the truth about Jesus Christ. In verse 6 he affirms that Gaius, who is walking in the truth (v. 4), is also known for his love. So often, people who are big on the truth use it as a club to wail on those who don't agree with them. Or, those who emphasize love are soft on the truth; they end up being nice when they need to stand up for the truth. But since God is the God of truth *and* love, godly people will be characterized by *both* truth *and* love.

Sometimes, love requires confronting a person who is in theological or moral error. Presumably, Diotrephes did not teach the errors of the heretics, or John would have said something about that. But, Diotrephes was a self-serving, unloving man, and John hits him very hard for these sins. We must assume that the apostle of love was acting in love towards this sinning man. Of course, love not only confronts sin. Also...

D. Love manifests itself in practical good deeds.

A delegation that returned from visiting Gaius had testified of his love. Gaius had welcomed them into his home, even though they had been strangers to him before their visit. He had treated them "in a manner worthy of God." When they left, he loaded them with supplies for their journey and with money for their mission work. His love was not just talk. It showed itself in treating others as he himself would wish to be treated. Being hospitable is one qualification for being an elder (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). But all believers are commanded to "pursue hospitality" (Rom. 12:13). We are to be a people "zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). Biblical love isn't just feeling the warm fuzzies; it is practical good deeds.

John writes of these missionaries (v. 7), "For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles." These missionaries were not "peddling the word of God" (2 Cor. 2:17), receiving donations from the unbelievers that they were seeking to reach. John says (v. 8) that God's people should support such workers, and in doing so, we become fellow workers with the truth of the gospel that they proclaim. One practical way for you to show Christ's love by good deeds is to help support missionaries

who go out for the sake of His name. The prosperous soul walks in the truth and in love.

2. The prosperous soul submits to apostolic authority (Diotrephes, the bad example, 9-10).

Diotrephes did not submit to apostolic authority (he did not accept what John said, v. 9). Rather than being a prosperous soul, Diotrephes was a destitute soul. His negative example gives us four characteristics of the destitute soul that we need to avoid if we want to have prosperous souls:

- A. The destitute soul loves to be first.

Diotrephes “loves to be first among them” (v. 9). Therein lies the explanation for the majority of church problems down through history! People want to be first.

As I said, Diotrephes’ theology was orthodox. If it had not been, John would have condemned him as a heretic. His problem was not his theology, but rather his personal ambition and pride that led him to oppose even the apostle John. He probably had reasons for his opposition. He may have said to the church, “John doesn’t understand the danger of welcoming these traveling teachers into this church. We need to maintain pure doctrine here. We don’t know what kinds of errors these men may bring in. John is just a senile old man who means well, but he’s gone soft in his old age. Follow me! Don’t receive these teachers into your homes. If you do, we’ll have to put you out of the church.” Diotrephes may have had the truth, but the only person he loved was himself!

When my brother was young, he formed a club with his friends, as young boys tend to do. Of course, such clubs must have rules. My brother’s club rules were very simple: (1) I am the boss of this club. (2) You don’t boss the boss! Our family often laughed about those rules.

But, when adult men and women bring those rules into a local church, it creates friction among the flock. I’ve seen many pastors and church leaders that play by those rules, seeking to lord it over the flock. During my first months here, I had lunch with the man who was then the state director of our association. He said, “Steve, you’ve got to build your power base in the church.” I didn’t say anything, but I was shocked. I thought to myself, “Sorry, but I’m

not into building a power base in the church!" Paul specified that an elder must not be self-willed (Titus 1:7; see 1 Pet. 5:2-3).

B. The destitute soul uses gossip and slander to run down his opponents.

Diotrephes unjustly accused John and his delegates with wicked words. He barred these traveling teachers from the church because he wanted to be the sole authority and leader of the church. He wanted everyone to look up to him, not to Jesus Christ. It threatened him if people learned from others, and so he used gossip and slander to criticize even the apostle John.

Gossip is sharing information (which may be true) with those who have no business hearing it. The gossip uses it to bolster his status: He's in the know! Or, he uses it to prejudice people against someone. Slander is using partial truths or flat-out lies to damage someone's reputation. Often the slanderer will say something that is partly true, so that he can claim that he spoke the truth. But it was not the *whole* truth, and sharing it misled others to believe something false about the person. The name, *devil*, means *slanderer*, so it is a serious sin!

C. The destitute soul uses relationships for power.

Diotrephes did not receive the brethren and he forbade those who desired to do so, putting them out of the church. Why didn't Diotrephes welcome these godly Christian workers? Because he did not value people and relationships. Rather, he *used* people to build or protect his power base. If you didn't go along with him, he would force you out of the church, no doubt under the pretense of keeping the church pure.

That's exactly how the world operates. The way to move up in the world is to build relationships with powerful people. You do favors for them so that they owe you in return. You play one person off of another, all in an attempt to put yourself in a powerful position. But it leads to poverty of soul, not to prosperity of soul.

D. The destitute soul bullies others through intimidation.

If people in the church didn't agree with Diotrephes, he bullied them into compliance or he put them out of the church. He had the power to do it. It was church politics at the worst!

Again, how like the world! The world writes books on how to get what you want and how to win by intimidation. It runs TV shows with a supposedly successful, but ruthless boss, whose trademark line is, "You're fired!" As Jesus said (Mark 10:42-44), the "rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all."

Positively, the prosperous soul walks in the truth and love. He submits to apostolic authority, which we now have in the New Testament, seeking to serve rather than to be served.

3. The prosperous soul imitates godly examples (Demetrius, the good testimony, 11-12).

In verse 11, John again addresses Gaius, exhorting him not to imitate what is evil (the bad example of Diotrophes), but rather what is good (the positive example of Demetrius). Whether Diotrophes was a genuine believer or not, we cannot tell, although John says, "the one who does evil has not seen God." But Diotrophes was in the role of leader of a Christian church. He must have had some sort of following, or else John would not have written this warning. The point is, we all need godly examples to follow, but we must be careful in choosing those examples. Even those who are recognized Christian leaders may not be good examples to follow.

How do you discern whether a person is worth imitating or not? Look for the fruit of the Spirit in his or her character. Look at his deeds (v. 11). Are they in line with the fruit of the Spirit or the deeds of the flesh? Then, look at the person's reputation. In the case of Demetrius, everyone testified that he was a godly man. "Everyone" obviously means, "everyone in general." Diotrophes, I'm sure, would not have testified of Demetrius' good character or deeds. But those who are walking with God will agree about the godly character of a godly man.

Also, John says, "the truth itself" bore witness to Demetrius' good character. This means that his life was consistent with the character qualities and moral standards of God's Word. Rather than being domineering, as Diotrophes was, Demetrius was a hum-

ble servant. Rather than being self-centered, he practiced biblical love. Further, John added his testimony to Demetrius' godly character. If a man walks with God, other godly leaders will acknowledge that fact.

When you find such godly role models, imitate them! As I've said before, I have found more help spiritually by reading the biographies of godly men and women than from any other source outside of the Bible itself. None of them were perfect, of course, but all of them have shown me in practical ways what it means to walk in the truth of God's Word. I highly recommend that you read the lives of these great saints from the past. (There is a bibliography of Christian biographies on the church web site.)

Conclusion

The story is told of a Texas millionaire who wanted to be buried in his Cadillac. So when he died, the undertakers dug an enormous grave and placed the Cadillac on a huge lowering device. They dressed the corpse in his sportiest clothes, put a cigar in his mouth, seated him behind the steering wheel, and set the speedometer at 80 miles per hour.

The mourners gathered around the grave. As the unusual coffin slowly sank into the ground to the appropriate words of committal, a millionaire friend of the deceased brushed a tear from his eye and sighed, "Man, that's living!"

But, of course, it's not living—it's death! True prosperity is not to live as a millionaire and be buried in your Cadillac. True prosperity is to be rich toward God (Luke 12:21). True prosperity is to have a prosperous soul. The way to that eternal prosperity is to walk in the truth and in love, to submit to apostolic authority as revealed in the New Testament, and to imitate godly examples. Then it may be said of you, "Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers." And your pastors will have great joy to hear that you are walking in the truth.

Application Questions

1. Is there a danger in bequeathing a large inheritance to your children, especially if they're not walking in the truth? Discuss.
2. Why is the "health and wealth gospel" a serious error? How would you refute it biblically?
3. Would you want your physical health to match your spiritual health? If not, how can you correct this situation?
4. How can we grow in knowledge of the truth and yet avoid spiritual pride? What are the marks of such pride?

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