

Letter To A Friend

Mark Heath, 23rd Sept 2005

¹The elder, To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth. ²Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. ³It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. ⁴I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

3 John 1-4 (NIV)

We all know the importance of having good friendships. Friends are people with whom you can enjoy the good times in life, and who will also stick around to help you through the hard times. The ability to make friends, and to make those friendships grow deeper is one that comes more naturally to some than others. Those of us who find it hard would do well to put some deliberate thought into how we can improve in this important life skill, and learn some lessons from the example of the apostle John.

When we are looking for new friends, we often look for people who are like us. Those who share our interests or our sense of humour, or perhaps those who are of a similar age and from a similar background to us. But for Christians, the most important common bond between two friends is that both have been born again, and are in relationship with Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. The church provides a ready made community for every believer to immerse themselves in and find genuine love and real friendships.

But even amongst Christians, we must work at maintaining good friendships. It is not automatic. In this brief letter of 3 John, the apostle John writes to his friend Gaius. Though they are separated by distance, they have a strong bond of love for one another. John writes to express his love for his friend, and to offer him encouragement and advice. Verse 4 suggests, that Gaius had become a Christian through the ministry of John, and now John felt a fatherly love and responsibility to this younger man in the faith.

John writes to a dear friend (v1)

In verse 1 we see that John calls Gaius his “dear friend”. We should not be embarrassed of speaking of our love for one another as believers. Hearing John speak this way would have assured Gaius that he was not alone in the situation he was in, and that he had a friend he could rely on whatever he was facing. Don't assume that your friends automatically know how much you care for them. Look for ways of showing it.

What's more, John says that he loves Gaius “in truth”. The terms “love” and “truth” are key concepts in the letter of 1 John, and there is something of a double-meaning to what John is saying here. To love someone “in truth” can simply mean that you truly love them. This is a love that is genuine, and expressed in action. In 1 John 3:18 believers are encouraged not just to love in “word and talk”, but in “deed and truth”. If we truly love someone it must be demonstrated by the way we sacrificially give of ourselves for their benefit.

But John and Gaius also share a love for the gospel – the *truth* about God's plan of salvation through Jesus. And this also is the basis of their strong friendship. As their individual commitment to the truth of God's word increases, so their common bond in the faith grows stronger also.

Both of these meanings of “love in truth” come together in Jesus Christ. He is both the ultimate definition of truth (John 14:6) and the ultimate example of love (1 John 4:10). As we grow in likeness to Jesus and love for him, then our ability to be good friends to one another will also grow.

John prays for his friend (v2)

Not only is it good to encourage our friends and remind them of our love for them, but we should be praying for them regularly. Through prayer we are able to bring blessing into their lives even

though we may be separated by great distance. John prays for three things here: health, success, and spiritual well-being.

The first of these two requests may seem a bit unspiritual and even carnal to some. Aren't we supposed to be setting our minds on things above? But if we love someone, we will want what is best for them in every area of life. We want them to enjoy life to the full and to realise their God-given potential. And of course, like John, we will not neglect to pray for their spiritual well-being as well.

So if we can ask for health and success for our friends, can we pray for these for ourselves too? I believe that the answer is yes, as long as we are careful. If we only ask for these things for ourselves and not others it reveals a selfish attitude. And if health and success is all we ever ask for it reveals an earthly-minded and materialistic attitude. If we are seeking first the kingdom, then we will want our health to be good to enable us to work hard in the service of God, and we will want success in the things we are doing for the glory of God.

So when we pray, let us remember to pray for our friends as well as ourselves. And let us have the same balance that John did in his prayers for Gaius – asking God to bless every area of life, both physical and spiritual.

John gets news from his friend (v3,4)

John of course was living before the days of mobile phones and email. Getting news from a friend who lived far off was not easy. So when some brothers returned from a trip to Gaius' home church, John was eager to get some news. He longed to know if his prayers were being answered.

The news he heard absolutely delighted him. Gaius was being faithful to the truth. He was holding fast to the gospel, and not allowing anything to throw him off course. Doubts, temptations and false teaching will all arise from time to time, and if we are to keep going we will require a deep commitment to the truth.

But Gaius was not simply remaining doctrinally orthodox, by believing the truth; he was continuing to "walk in the truth". Belief in God's word must be accompanied with obedience to God's word.

Doubtless John also asked for news of Gaius' health and general prosperity, but it is obvious that the most important prayer request of verse 2 was the third. More than anything, John wanted to know that his friend was going on with God. In verse 4 he states this explicitly – there is nothing that makes him more happy than knowing that his friends are walking in the truth.

When I hear news from old friends, I am glad when I hear that they are healthy and doing well in their careers. But if they are not walking in the truth, then there is also sadness. This is why we should be regularly praying for the spiritual well-being of our friends. They will face temptations and difficulties, and they will need the grace of God to stand firm. Just as Paul regularly prayed for grace and peace for his friends, so we too should recognise their need of God's grace and peace in life.

Conclusion

John was clearly a good friend to Gaius. He does whatever he can to help – he writes, he prays, he gets news, and as we see in verse 14, he visits where possible. Likewise we ought to be the sort of people who take every opportunity to encourage our friends, to pray for them regularly, to take the trouble to find out how they are doing, and to endeavour to spend time together. Let us use every means at our disposal to encourage one another in the faith.