

#4 Being a truth-in-love community

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[0 : 0 0] But it can be quite interesting to examine what exactly we're wishing for each other. For instance, the greeting frequently offered on this occasion would of course be Gong Xi Fa Chai.

But what does it mean? It doesn't actually mean Happy Chinese New Year, but instead it's literally wishing you more material prosperity. And for the more traditionally minded, this is why they will also insist on having fish on this occasion.

Because the Chinese word for fish has the same pronunciation as the Chinese word for abundance. And noodles are also very important since they represent longevity and good health.

Now if we're not so traditionally minded, we probably don't think too much about it. For us, the words are just a matter of courtesy and we eat fish because we think it's tasty.

We focus not so much on prosperity, but on being together as a family. But it's still interesting to think about because it presents an insight into what our broader culture wishes for, whether they realize it or not.

[1 : 1 8] Indeed, you might even say that it's what all humans everywhere wish for. Health and prosperity represent classic human preoccupations, whatever your culture.

And there's nothing wrong with wishing each other to be sound in body and to do well generally. After all, look at how John begins his letter to his friend Gaius, verse 2.

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you. This was a standard greeting in the letters of that time, equivalent to our how are you, hope you are well.

And John's happy to use it. Christians are not Gnostics. Gnostics are people who believe that the body is inherently evil and that only the non-physical world, the spirit world, is what matters.

But that has never been the Christian viewpoint. After all, God created the physical world, including our bodies. And he called it good. Matter matters.

[2 : 3 1] But this is not all that John is concerned for. He goes on to say in verse 2, Even as your soul is getting along well, another translation puts it, just as you are progressing spiritually.

You see, what he really wants is for Gaius to do well spiritually. And for the rest of his letter, he will be devoting his attention to soul matters.

Christians are people who care about body and soul. For a Christian with a healthy body, but an unhealthy soul, is an unhealthy person.

And a church filled with people who are healthy physically, but unhealthy spiritually, is an unhealthy church. And yet so often, Christians can be preoccupied with the body while neglecting the soul.

You'll hear it in our prayers. We petition God to give each other good health and prosper in life, but rarely to be godly in our priorities and in times of stress.

[3 : 52] You hear it in our conversations. We ask about whether someone is recovering from their latest cough, but never whether someone is recovering from neglecting their personal Bible reading.

And when we do that, our Christian culture ends up mimicking the broader culture rather than differentiating itself from it.

It's the Christianized version of saying, and eating fish for longevity. Our desires have become shaped by the world, not by the word.

And when we do that, So this morning, let's do some reorienting work. Let's go back to God's word and ask, what should we really be wishing for each other?

What should we long for in the soul of our church? Well, this is where I expect this little letter of 3 John will help us. It's the shortest letter in the New Testament, and it's much neglected.

[5 : 02] A number of you might be reading this letter for the very first time in your lives this morning. But it packs a big punch. And I hope it will shape our desires and form core conviction number 4 for our church.

So what should we wish for each other? Well, let's see the very first thing John zooms in on. Verse 3. There you have it.

Firstly, we should wish for each other to be faithful to the truth. John's heard first-hand reports that Gaius has not been swayed by the teaching of people John called Antichrist earlier in 1 John 2.

These were people who had reinvented Jesus, making him into something he was not. Perhaps they made him into a genie, not a saviour.

A human teacher, not the Messiah. But Gaius clung onto the teaching he first heard from John. He stayed faithful to the real Jesus, who came in the flesh, who lived in complete righteousness, who died as our atoning sacrifice, and who was raised to life to destroy the devil's work.

[6 : 42] And that makes John happy. Truth is important to John. He mentions it four times in the opening four verses.

And he's glad to see Gaius remain in it. But staying faithful to the truth doesn't stop there. What makes John really happy is that Gaius continues to walk in the truth.

That's what he says at the end of verse 3. In other words, he's living a life consistent with the truth that he professes to believe in.

We'll see some concrete examples of what that means later on. But the key thing to observe at this point is this. Gaius is walking in the footsteps of Jesus.

And the good news is he's just one of many. In the early 2nd century, not long after 3 John was written, a Greek orator named Aristides sent a surprising report to the Roman emperor Hadrian.

[7 : 54] He had been observing the Christians. And he said this to the emperor. It's in your outline. The Christians, O king, have found the truth by going and seeking for it.

They comfort those who wrong them and make friends of them. They labor to do good to their enemies. He that has gives freely to him that has not.

If anyone among them is poor and needy and they do not have food to spare, they fast for two or three days that they may supply him with necessary food.

Truly, this is a new people and there is something divine in them. How wonderful is that? This non-Christian knows Christians' claim to possess the truth.

But he can see that when someone becomes a Christian, when he says he knows the truth, it doesn't make him narrow-minded and arrogant.

[9 : 01] Instead, it makes him into an attractive, new person. Because the truth Christians possess is actually a person.

Jesus. And he is not narrow-minded and arrogant. And just as Jesus comforts those who wrong him and befriends them, just as Jesus does good to his enemies, even dying on the cross for them, just as Jesus gives abundantly to those with nothing to offer him, so do his people.

For they walk in the truth that is Jesus himself. When we live out the truth, we claim to possess it's hard for charges of arrogance and intolerance to stick.

And this is what gets John excited. This is what gives John the greatest joy. Can you hear how thrilled he is in verse 4? I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Anytime he hears of any Christian anywhere, living as a follower of Jesus, he is over the moon. My friends, is this what gets you excited?

[10 : 30] Is this what gives you the greatest joy? Do you get excited when for the very first time, that timid person in your group who's been quiet all year, prays aloud for his brother or sister in Christ that God might use them?

Do you get excited when someone who's been in church all their lives but has never shown any interest in spiritual things up to that point, suddenly asks you an honest Bible question?

Do you get excited when you see someone whom you know is an introvert and yet quietly, behind the scenes, tries to do her best to make the non-Christian feel welcome so that he can hear about Jesus?

Or do you only celebrate straight A's, job promotions, safe travels? What do you celebrate? Who do you celebrate?

I used to meet one-to-one with a number of people to read the Bible with them, pray with them, and share a bit of life together. One of them, I remember, was Shock when I first met him for lunch and then I put out a Bible and invited him to study it together.

[11 : 47] It was a new and probably weird experience for him. But he and I kept on meeting and he really began to enjoy studying the Bible together to have the opportunity to ask his many questions and then simply to pray for one another.

Now we live in different cities all these years later, but I'm so happy that every time I meet him to hear how he's now become a Bible study leader and encourager to others, a core team member of the church he's at.

or in our very own church. I just heard very recently of a story of one of our very own members being approached by some people at a shopping mall who claimed to be Christians.

But they began to tell her that she needed something more than Jesus. Jesus was the first step, but she needed a second step to get into the kingdom, they said.

Now she would call herself a relatively young Christian, but she knew something was off. And she told them so, that what they said was not the truth.

[13 : 01] You see, she stayed faithful to the truth she knew about Jesus, and she kept walking in it. And it gave me great joy to hear that story, because it's a sign of great growth.

It's a sign of spiritual health. what do you celebrate? Who do you celebrate? It works the other way around as well.

Another one of the people I used to meet one-to-one with was going great at first. I remember one time when we were listening to a sermon together, and the speaker asked a question about how much confidence we had in Jesus.

And the person told me enthusiastically, oh, on a scale of one to ten, my confidence is ten. He was riding sky high. Even though he came from a non-Christian family, he said he could take the pressure.

I remember offering him a bed to sleep in if he ever got kicked out. But something changed. He began to avoid my cause. He did not show up for appointments.

[14 : 08] He began hanging out solely with his music friends. and then he totally dropped off the radar. I don't know where he is now, but I still feel great sorrow when I think of him.

And I think this week it moved me again to pray for him. I long for him to come back to the truth. And this should be our greatest wish.

Above even good health and good circumstances, we should long for each other to remain faithful to the truth. Above good results and good jobs, parents should long for their children to walk with Jesus.

Above good attendance and even good service, small group leaders should long for their members to dig deeper into the Bible and to grow increasingly in godliness.

Tree John asks us to search ourselves and ask what really gives us the greatest joy. And if it's not the same as what gives the apostle John joy, then we must go straight to the throne room of God and plead with him to change our hearts, our desires, our longings, so that we may have his heart for others.

[15 : 37] So that's the first thing we should wish for each other. Here's the second. We should wish for each other to be committed in love.

Committed in love. Having praised Gaius for his faithfulness to the truth, the brothers and sisters continue their positive report.

Verse 6, they have told the church about your love. Notice that truth and love are not opposites of one another.

Sometimes the language we use suggests they are. We say things like we need to balance truth and love as if the two cannot coexist. But Gaius' faithfulness to the truth is reflected precisely in the way he loves.

That's what verse 5 is getting at. Dear friends, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters. Gaius, you are walking in the truth precisely when you do these loving things for your brothers and sisters.

[16 : 57] What was he doing? He was showing hospitality to them. He was being generous to them. These people he was welcoming were probably travelling missionaries from John.

They were strangers, people he did not know. But as soon as he knew they were Christians, he treated them as if they were his own family. Qin Yin and I once stayed with this 85-year-old Christian lady while on a mission trip.

She didn't know us beforehand, but she treated us like royalty. She brought out the luxury marmalade for breakfast. She made sure to pray for us.

She treated us with love. Maybe that's what Gaius did, whipping up his signature dish, bringing out his best cutlery, taking out new bedding from the wardrobe or with love.

And John says, keep it up. Keep being generous. Verse 6, please send them on their way in a manner that honours God.

[18 : 14] John is saying in a rather first century way, be generous to them. That's one big way you commit to loving them. But why should Gaius open his wallet?

Well, John gives several reasons. Number one, because these are people who are proclaiming the gospel. That's in verse 7.

As one preacher puts it, they're not there for their own gain, but for the sake of his name. All ministry is important in God's kingdom, whether it's preparing rosters, looking after the poor, and maintaining facilities.

But it is especially the ministry of the word that must be central, because only the proclamation of God's word brings people into the kingdom and helps them to grow and to serve.

And so ministers of the word, like these people from John, deserve our full support. Reason number two, they receive no help from the pagans.

[19 : 28] That's in verse 7 again. John is saying, there is no money pouring in from the unbelievers, and it makes sense.

Why should unbelievers support the work of the gospel? They might support charity, political causes, environmental initiatives.

But unbelievers, by definition, don't see Jesus as the supreme being of infinite worth. They don't believe Jesus is the underlying solution to the brokenness of this world.

Only believers, by definition, treasure Jesus. And so John says, if that's you, you call yourself a Christian, then naturally you would support such ministry.

You would naturally want to love your brothers and sisters involved in this kind of work. For by extension, you love your unbelieving neighbour because you believe such ministry will introduce them to the one who is love himself.

[20 : 45] Reason number three, so that we can be partners in the gospel. Verse eight, John writes, we ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.

By being generous, Gaius is showing that he is sharing in the same enterprise. He has the same vision as John, which means he's on the same team as Jesus.

You invest in something when you share the same core convictions. And in doing so, you become fellow workers.

That's how the ESV translates verse eight. Think about that. Not everyone may be gifted to be an evangelist or a Bible teacher, but all can pray.

All can support the work, whether financially or practically like showing hospitality in this case. And when you do so, you become a fellow worker, not a mere spectator.

[22 : 05] So don't neglect the power of hospitality and generosity. In a world where we hunger for genuine relationships that go beyond the surface, and where it's all too rare to see open hands reaching out to others, well, they can go a long way.

When we do so, we walk in the truth. We walk like Jesus who welcomes us at the cross and will host us one day at the great banquet in the new creation.

God for showing hospitality is not so much about you scrambling to make your house look as neat and nice as possible just before the guests arrive.

Now, hospitality in the Christian sense is more about welcoming and including people the way Jesus did. it's about asking, how can I make this person feel the deep love of God by my actions?

We can do this in a variety of ways. We show hospitality when we lovingly engage people. Church, let me share with you the experience of my friend's friend who visited us on Christmas Eve.

[23 : 37] After our service ended, she stood there in the courtyard in the corner for a good total of eight minutes conspicuously alone. No one said a word to her before I finally had a chance to break away from my conversations to get to her.

She was gracious about it, but church, if our message is about God welcoming sinners, and yet we fail to show hospitality, we're making it much harder for people to believe the gospel.

How can they believe Christ welcomes outsiders when his people don't? So let's make sure we welcome and engage people. Turn on your hospitality radar.

people. We show hospitality too when we pay full attention to people. In the age of smartphones, and I'm guilty of this as well, we allow ourselves all too often to be distracted by the beats and sounds coming from our device, when we should try to give our total selves to the person in front of us.

When we do so, we are communicating they are important. And we show hospitality when we make the most of mealtimes.

[25 : 05] There's something about food, isn't there, that can help facilitate relationships. So use them. Invite people to go makan, both to have fun, but also to talk about meaningful soul matters like John does in this letter.

And love is not shown just through hospitality and generosity. Perhaps more surprisingly, it's also shown through confrontation, and imitation.

That's what we discover in verses 9 to 12. In verses 9 and 10, we have an instance of what I will call anti-hospitality.

John now tells us about another guy, the Othryphus. And he absolutely refuses to welcome the messengers from John. By implication, he's rejecting John's message.

He didn't want to be seen as being on the same team. It doesn't necessarily mean that Diotrphus was denying Jesus. John never appears to rebuke him in that way in this letter.

[26 : 27] But clearly he was at odds with John. Perhaps they had a personality clash. Perhaps they had a doctrinal dispute. Perhaps they had a disagreement over ministry philosophy.

And it was getting out of hand. Diotrphus was so determined to protect his way of doing things that he even prevented members of his church from welcoming John's messengers.

Look at verse 10. He also stops those who want to do so, that's showing hospitality, and puts them out of church. But John never left Diotrphus and his church alone.

Because he loved them. Verse 9, I wrote to the church, he says. Now, John, by this point, is well over 80 years old.

He could be enjoying his retirement years and taking a hands-off approach. But he knows what Diotrphus was doing was not right.

[27 : 36] So, John says that he loves to be first. He doesn't want to give up his territory. Diotrphus has forgotten that Christ alone is to be first.

And so, it is an act of love to confront him. Verse 10 again. When I come, John says, I will call attention to what he is doing.

he has to put a stop to the malicious nonsense that Diotrphus is spreading around. We have no idea what he was saying, but it's clearly something that brings damage to those around him.

And John isn't planning on sweeping it under the carpet. He's going to call it out. So, there is a place for confrontation in love.

I suspect the majority of you are like me. We hate conflict. We prefer to close our eyes when we see someone not doing something that is unchrist-like.

[28 : 43] we hope someone else would do the rebuking instead. But if we truly wish for each other to remain faithful to the truth, then it is only loving to call attention to people who are going astray, being wise about the timing, of course.

perhaps we need to make a phone call and check out why someone has been missing from church for a couple of months. Perhaps we need to take a deep breath and put a stop to any undercurrent of gossip and bad mouthing that's been going around.

Christian faith is personal but never private. Christian faith is a public affair, which is why in the New Testament, there are so many instructions ending with one another.

Teach one another. Admonish one another. Forgive one another. Love one another. And loving includes wanting people not to drift away from the truth, but to walk in it.

Church is about being a truth-in-love community. But confrontation, thankfully, is not the only way we grow.

[30 : 15] Imitation is another way. Not imitation of Diotrephus, John says, but another brother, Demetrius. He's clearly a well-regarded Christian.

Look at verse 12. Others speak well of him. And even the truth speaks well of him. Meaning that if you were to watch Demetrius yourself, you would see for yourself that he truly walks with Jesus.

His own conduct is an endorsement in itself. And of course, John recommends him too. How lovely is that? A triple recommendation.

So look for role models. When I was at university, I was fortunate to have so many role models to choose from.

I think of the person who made intentional effort to talk to international students like me, who is culturally different. He modeled to me intentional love.

[31 : 18] I think of others who talk seriously about serving the Lord in full-time paid gospel ministry when they had prestigious postgraduate qualifications after their name.

Well, they modeled to me wholehearted sacrifice in service. Look for a good role model to imitate. But more than that, be a good role model yourself.

Especially if you've been a Christian for many years, it's actually your responsibility. If you were to turn somewhere, somewhere like Titus 2, for example, you would see that it's almost assumed that older Christians should be intentionally modeling the Christian life for younger Christians.

So that's a challenge for you. If someone were to ask you this morning, how should I live as a Christian? Could you say to them, just shadow me and watch me live my everyday life for a week?

Would they see a Christian life worthy of imitation? this is what the truth in love community is all about.

[32 : 40] Wishing each other with all our hearts to walk faithfully in Christ, committed to love from different angles, in hospitality, generosity, imitation, even confrontation.

And if we saw a genuine truth in love community in action, I'm certain it would be extremely compelling. The reason Me Too movement shows that the world does desire truth to come out, and that it's starving to see love that's not reduced to sexual encounters.

And if they were to see both combined together, truth and love, well, they would know why Jesus is so magnificent. Now, I just want you to observe one more thing about this letter.

We're actually reading private correspondence between two close friends, don't forget that. On the one side, we have John, an elder, verse 1.

That's his position, but it's also an accurate description of his age. I said earlier he would have been at least in his 80s by now. And he's a Jew.

[34 : 02] On the other side, we have Gaius, who must be decades younger than John. He's a Gentile. Gaius is a common Roman name.

So two people of different generations and backgrounds. But see how they love one another. we've already seen Gaius love via his faithfulness to the truth in welcoming those messengers from John.

But let's also listen to John, verses 13 and 14. I have much to write to you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink.

I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you, the friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

Isn't it incredible that two such different people could have such a warm relationship like that? Wouldn't it be incredible if in our church, the different generations could speak meaningfully about spiritual things and encourage each other towards truth and love in this way?

[35 : 17] Thank you. When I was a 19-year-old at university, there was an old man called Joe. He was in his 70s, a widower.

And one of the kindest things he did for me was simply to invite me into his family home on a Sunday afternoon, get to know his grandkids, and together we just played board games and chatted about Christian books.

And we would talk on and off for the next couple of years. how could that happen? A 70-year-old American man and a 19-year-old Malaysian teenager.

Because we had the ultimate common bond, Christ himself. This sermon marks the end of our core conviction series.

But I hope it marks the beginning of renewal, a rededication, a recommitment. These core convictions I've mentioned, centered on the gospel, driven by God's word, focused on growing disciples, being a truth-in-love community.

[36 : 35] They're not new. They're not innovative. They shouldn't be. As I hope I've shown you sufficiently over the past month, they're simply biblical.

They weren't just things that I invented in my own mind. And my greatest fear is that we all just nod our heads and forget all about this after Chinese New Year.

My greatest fear is that maybe our church isn't really serious about following Jesus, and so don't take these convictions seriously. But my greatest hope is that you would all show that I am very silly for having such a fear.

We've got a long way to go to get ourselves aligned with these biblical convictions. But as long as we all have our faces and our feet set in the same direction, well, that's okay.

Because church, let me make the words of 3 John 4 my own. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are all walking in the truth.

[37 : 54] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.