

Sermon Follow-Up for Jan. 25, 2015

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Sunday's sermon on 3 John highlighted some of the ways that teachers of a "prosperity gospel" (which is actually only a counterfeit gospel) use 3 John 2 to promote the idea that it is God's will for each and every Christian to prosper and be in good health all the time. Furthermore, many of these false teachers associate health and wealth with spiritual maturity: if you're soul is prospering, then you should also be enjoying health and wealth. Conversely, you must lack faith if you're experiencing trials or want.

I didn't take much time to refute the prosperity theology and its many more subtle manifestations because I wanted to focus on what 3 John 2 is really all about. And ironically enough, 3 John is a sort of refutation of the very prosperity theology that some use the epistle to promote. 3 John 2 can be literally translated "I pray that it would go well with you and that you would be well/sound, even as it goes well with your soul." The word for "go well" literally means "good way" and is translated "to be led along a good path" or "to have a safe and successful journey" (see Rom. 1:10). It can also be used metaphorically to speak of success (1 Cor. 16:2). This imagery of a journey fits well with the biblical theme we see throughout Scripture. Deuteronomy holds forth the way of life and blessing or the way of death and cursing. Psalm 1 speaks of the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. Proverbs is based on the dichotomy between the way of wisdom and the way of folly. The Sermon on the Mount closes with the contrast between the wise man and the foolish man. Jesus has much to say about following him on the way of discipleship, which is the way of the cross. Those who lose their lives on the way of the discipleship are promised to gain the kingdom of heaven. As counter-intuitive as this sounds, the "good way" of self-sacrifice is the good life we're all seeking.

With John's emphasis on "walking in the truth", it seems fitting that he would use this word to describe Gaius's situation. The apostle John knew that Gaius was "walking in the truth" and "being led along the good path" because of the testimony of the missionaries and church planters who had been the recipients of Gaius's generous hospitality and support. These brothers testified to Gaius's truth/integrity, his deeds of faith/faithfulness, and his love. But as Jesus predicted, the "good way" of discipleship includes trials, persecution, and costly self-sacrifice. Gaius's efforts were being frustrated by an arrogant and rebellious man named Diotrephes who stirring up discord and threatening to split the church. It seems likely that one reason for John writing this personal letter was to remind Gaius that it was well with his soul despite all evidence to the contrary.

And so we learn from 3 John that the vision of the good life promoted by prosperity teachers is distorted and backward. We think the good life is getting everything we want, when it's actually found in learning contentment and gratitude for what we already have. We think the good life is found in getting what we deserve, when it's actually found in humbly accepting the grace we could never earn. We think the good life is when the universe revolves around us, when really the good life is the self-forgetfulness that comes when we lay down our lives in service to others. The good life is the way of the cross, the way of sacrifice, and the way of faithfulness in the face of affliction.

At the same time, this by no means requires that Christians face afflictions and trials as stoics, keeping a stiff upper lip and trying to ignore the very real pain and loss we often encounter in life. Likewise, we should encourage our brothers and sisters who are undergoing affliction or persecution but not in a way that invalidates their suffering or makes them feel guilty for wrestling with God. God may very well give us grace to sing "It Is Well with My Soul" or "Whate'er My God Ordains Is Right" as an affirmation of our submission to his sovereignty, but God also gives us full permission to pray the Psalms (all of them) as we struggle to work out our faith in the midst of trials. In fact, it may very well be that the ability to say "It is well with my soul" comes only after an intense season of struggle. After all, this is the pattern we see repeated throughout the Psalter.