

Series: John's Letters

Title: Counsel for Christian Living

Text: 3 John 9-12

Date: October 3, 2021

Verse 9

In verse 9, John transitioned to talk about a people problem within the first-century church. He said, "I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have first place among them, does not receive our authority" (3 John 9). It is important to recognize that John's discussion concerning a problematic person within the church came right on the heels of his talk about giving for missionaries and ministers (3 John 5-8). From reading between the lines of the apostle's letter, it seems he had written a third letter after he wrote 2 John. That letter is now lost to history, but it apparently contained an appeal for the church to financially support traveling evangelists. It seems that the man mentioned in our text — Diotrephes — intercepted that letter and prevented it from being read in churches.

The man Diotrephes was a trouble maker. He had an inflated sense of self-importance. Perhaps his pride-oriented perspective was a result of his cultural upbringing. His name literally meant "Zeus-nurtured" or "one who comes from Zeus."¹ It was a popular first-century name, often given by Gentile mothers to their sons as an homage to Zeus, the father of all other Greek gods. Deities like Hercules and Apollo were thought to be the offspring of Zeus. Diotrephes' name informs us that he was a Gentile. If he was indeed a truly converted Christian, he was of pagan birth and background.

According to Gentile culture, it was perfectly permissible for men to assert themselves in self-aggrandizing ways. Jesus Himself commented on the pagan tendency toward self-promotion. He told His disciples, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them" (Mark 10:42). Perhaps Diotrephes' desire for control over local congregations was a result of his cultural upbringing. Maybe he regarded self-elevation and power-grabbing tactics as being perfectly permissible, as being a requirement for being successful in life.

John condemned the man's behavior by speaking of a love of having the "first place among" the congregation. The original language depicted one who liked to be the leader.² Certainly one can have healthy aspirations for leadership. That wasn't John's criticism with Diotrephes. The apostle knew the man had an inordinate form of "ambition, the desire to have the first place in everything."³ One commentator has postulated that the man might have been a deacon who attempted to use his position of service for power and prestige.⁴

Believers should always be on guard against the sin mentioned in our text. In all cultures and ages, there are tendencies and temptations to self-promotion. Since the Garden of Eden, Satan has prompted people to assert themselves above God and others. It has been his lie that man or woman can be "like God" that has driven many to live lives for prestige and power (Genesis 3:5). In fact, self-love and self-promotion are the very sins that originally drove Satan to rebel against the Lord (Isaiah 14:14).

Those who know Christ should be careful to know their rightful place in God's created order. The Bible warns us, "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:8). It encourages us to seek after humility, saying, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (James 4:10). The pursuit of recognition, fame, and prestige are contrary to the ideal

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 603.

² Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, ?.

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, ?.

⁴ Robertson, ?.

Christian life. Instead of seeking after such things first, believers are called to “seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).

Self-seeking is contrary to Christian living and it should be off limits within the church. The reason for this is simple. Christ is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18). None — no deacon, pastor, or church member — should have prominence over Him. Jesus deserves the first place in His church. All glory and honor is due His name and He gets glory when the respective members of local congregations employ their spiritual gifts and fulfill their functions within the body in a spirit of meekness and humility. May we all develop the mindset of John the Baptist, one who said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Verse 10

As if his self-promotion wasn't bad enough, Diotrephes also engaged in even more sinful behavior — he maliciously maligned others and he schemed to dismiss some from the church. John said, “This is why, if I come, I will remind him of the works he is doing, slandering us with malicious words...” (3 John 10). The apostle was intent on confronting the man's sin. He said, “will remind him of the works he is doing.” The original language meant “to bring up.”⁵ It seems John was intent on confronting Diotrephes. He undoubtedly planned to use Jesus' prescribed means of church accountability outlined in Matthew 18:15-20.

Why did John feel compelled to confront? Well, Diotrephes was guilty of “slandering” John and others. The Greek word translated “slandering” was one that strictly meant “to bubble up.”⁶ Figuratively, it portrayed one who chattered or blabbered about meaningless things.⁷ It was used to speak of one who spoke nonsense, who talked about things concerning which he or she had no real knowledge. In the context of interpersonal relationships, it referred to one who made empty charges against another.⁸ Instead of believing the worst about their brothers and sisters in Christ, and instead of leveling unfounded accusations against them, Christians are compelled by Christian love to believe the best about their fellow believers (1 Corinthians 13:7) while endeavoring to edify them in the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Diotrephes' slander was intense. John said it employed “malicious words.” His speech was malevolent. It was intended to injure others. Diotrephes' goal was to hurt John and John's ministry partners with harmful words. The man wasn't one who just shared a different opinion or exhibited a disagreement with other believers. He intentionally sought to tear others down through His words. Scripture warns Christians to avoid such sinful patterns of speech. Instead of tearing others down, believers are to build one another up so that grace might be experienced by all. Paul said, “No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29).

On top of slanderous speech, Diotrephes was guilty of even more sin. John said, “...he is not satisfied with that!” (3 John 10). The man desired to do more harm than that which was wrought by his words. Not being content with the harm brought on by his slander, he intentionally blocked other believers from having fellowship with the church. Those who tried to stand in his way encountered firm resistance. John said, “And he is not satisfied with that! He not only refuses to welcome fellow believers, but he even stops those who want to do so and expels them from the church” (3 John 10).

Diotrephes refused to show the hospitality required of believers toward fellow believers (Hebrews 13:1-2). But he did even more than that. He also sought to block other believers

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III,

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, ?.

⁷ Zodhiates, ?.

⁸ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, ?.

form showing hospitality. More than likely, John's words in verse 10 were allusion to the way in which Diotrephes had purposely destroyed a previous letter John had written. That letter, like the current letter (3 John 5-8), undoubtedly contained an appeal for the church to financially support traveling missionaries. For whatever reason, Diotrephes was antagonistic toward John's request for funds. Consequently, he destroyed the apostle's letter and kept the church from knowing about the request.

When others learned about Diotrephes' schemes, they spoke up. Instead of repenting, the man amped up his resistance. He sought to stop those who spoke out. He even led aims to discipline some by having them removed from the fellowship of the church! John said, "he even stops those who want to do so and expels them from the church" (3 John 10). The word translated "expels" is one that meant "to throw out." It conveyed a use of force.⁹

The scene amongst the first-century churches of Asia Minor was indeed tragic. One individual was wreaking havoc, slandering an apostle of the Lord and intimidating any who disagreed with him. Local congregations were certainly feeling the pains of discord and division. Instead of letting their light shine before men (Matthew 5:16), the light of their testimony was undoubtedly growing dim (Revelation 2:5).

Readers of John's letter should take note, toxic talk and devious division should be off limits. This does not mean there can never be disagreement within the church. There are certainly situations that call for confrontation and correction. John revealed such to be true through the way in which he confronted Diotrephes! However, the type of disagreement and discord that should be avoided is the type that is based on love of prestige, power, and prominence amongst the body (3 John 9-10). God's people should always keep in mind the strong warning of the Proverbs — "The Lord hates six things; in fact, seven are detestable to him: arrogant eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that plots wicked schemes, feet eager to run to evil, a lying witness who gives false testimony, and one who stirs up trouble among brothers" (Proverbs 6:16-19).

Verse 11

After calling out the sin of Diotrephes and announcing his intentions to confront the man, John encouraged the faithful amongst his readership to be careful to not imitate the man's actions. John said, "Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God" (3 John 11). The Greek word translated "imitate" is one from which we get our word "mimic."¹⁰ It referred to the act of copying the pattern of another person or thing.¹¹ As used by the apostle in our verse, the verb appeared as a command regarding a continual action.¹²

The apostle was likely aware that some were following Diotrephes' example. While there was probably a group with intentions just as debased as those belonging to the ringleader, there were probably a number of believers who had somewhat innocently got caught up in the man's schemes. Because of a lack of discernment on their part, they were easily ensnared by the man's tactics. John wanted his readers to unequivocally know that they should be on guard against the man. Instead of imitating the man's evil practices, they were to pursue after that which was good.

There is a lesson for all believers in John's warning. It is well known from Scripture that evil influences can corrupt (Psalm 1:1; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Galatians 5:9). Christians should strive to be discerning. They should hold up any purported spiritual leader against the

⁹ Zodhiates, ?.

¹⁰ Akin, ?.

¹¹ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, ?.

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, ?.

standard of God's Word. No leader is perfect, but if one does not measure up in some serious scriptural matter, believers should be careful to show no allegiance to that leader.

Like John, Paul had a vehement concern regarding this matter. He was so bold as to tell first-century Christians to imitate his life instead of the lives of those who were negligent and lazy (1 Thessalonians 3:7-9). When writing to the Corinthians, he flatly said, "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul knew there is power in the patterns Christians follow. Consequently, believers should be careful to only follow positive examples of Christian conduct and doctrine. One has rightly said, "We should ever be mindful on whom we set our eyes."¹³

In case his readers were unsure of who to listen to and follow, John provided a litmus test for discerning which examples should be emulated in verse 10. He said, "...do not imitate what is evil, but what is good." The word rendered good referred to that which was upright and virtuous. The term "evil" depicted godless living that was inferior in conduct and character.¹⁴ The believers amongst John's readers only needed to compare Diotrephes' lifestyle to the standard of God's Word to know that the man was not an example worth following. They needed to stop following the bad example set by Diotrephes' and his cronies and they needed to return to following the examples of the apostles and other Christians who possessed admirable Christian character. In short, they needed to "Detest evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9).

For John, this issue was significant, since many of his readers were unwittingly imitating the lifestyles of people who weren't even regenerate. At the end of verse 11, the apostle said, "The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God." As he had argued in his first letter, John contend that people who live ongoing lives of sin give evidence that they aren't really children of God (1 John 3:6-9). On the contrary, those who live lives of righteousness show that they are true believers. In following Diotrephes' example, some were unknowingly being led astray by an unbeliever. The church needed discernment.

Verse 12

After holding up the bad example of Diotrephes in verse 10, and after having instructed his readers concerning the importance of following the right types of people in verse 11, John held up a man named Demetrius as a admirable pattern of Christian living in verse 12. He said, "Everyone speaks well of Demetrius—even the truth itself. And we also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true" (3 John 12). The name "Demetrius" meant "belonging to December." It was a tribute to the Greek goddess of agriculture.¹⁵ Like Diotrephes, the man was of a pagan upbringing. Some think he was the Gentile blacksmith mentioned in Acts 19:23.¹⁶ It is believed that the man came to Christ after having previously resisted and persecuted Paul and others. Whatever the case, Demetrius was of Gentile birth and he was raised in paganism.

Demetrius inevitably experienced a cataclysmic change at salvation. His devotion to Christ had resulted in a strong reputation for faith and holiness. He had become "a disciple of high reputation."¹⁷ John said he was well-spoken of. The original language of the text meant "of good report." It referred to one who had a good testimony. John used perfect tense

¹³ Akin, ?.

¹⁴ Zodhiates, ?.

¹⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 604.

¹⁶ Robertson, ?.

¹⁷ Zodhibates, ?.

verbiage in speaking of the man; thus, he implied that Demetrius' testimony "had been given over a period of time and was still effective."¹⁸

John also emphasized Demetrius' exemplary character by speaking the way in which "everyone" spoke well of him. The man was blameless (1 Timothy 3:1). He maintained a good reputation in all areas of life (1 Timothy 3:7). There was none of the hypocrisy (Matthew 6:5) or duplicity in his life that often characterized vain religious professors. Like those mentioned in the Hall of Faith in the book of Hebrews, Demetrius lived a life that gave a bright testimony for Jesus (Hebrews 11:39).

Demetrius' reputation was so stellar because it was grounded in the truth of God. John made reference to this reality by speaking of "even the truth itself." While unregenerate humanity can sometimes put on a good show in the flesh, there is a type of Christian character that transcends man-generated goodness. Diotrephes exhibited the first type of moral goodness; Demetrius exhibited the later type. He showed forth a genuine form of godly character that was the product of the gospel, God's truth, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

To further bolster his support of Demetrius, John said, "...we also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true." John's appeal was to his apostolic authority. As he did in John 21:24, he defended his witness as an apostle of Jesus. From the context of John's writing, it seems that Demetrius was one of John's traveling evangelists. The apostle sent him with the letter of 3 John in hand. He hoped his readers would receive the man well, show him hospitality, and follow his example of godly Christian living.¹⁹ In John's mind, the man served as a far greater standard of Christian character than Diotrephes.

Demetrius stands as a perennial testimony to the benefit and power of a sound Christian testimony. When believers build their lives on the truth of Christ and seek to develop Christian character, the Lord can use them to powerfully encourage and equip fellow believers. Saints of every generation should strive to emulate the life of Christ. It should be their desire to have exemplary Christian character that emanates from a faith in gospel truth. The Lord uses such devotion, as he did with Demetrius, to build and strengthen His church.

¹⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, ?.

¹⁹ Akin, ?.