

“THOSE WHO LIKE TO BE FIRST.”

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Scripture Texts: III John 1:5-15

In this very short letter, we are given an up close and personal, intimate look inside the life of a little church in the first century. We are given a brief glimpse through the lives of three men in the church, three different personalities, three kinds of Christians that are in every church.

We can learn and benefit from each of them.

Gaius, vss. 5-8.

John begins by commending and praising Gaius. We have already seen that he knows and loves the truth, he lives it and passes it on. Gaius' faith and faithfulness are showing. Gaius is warm, friendly, welcoming, gracious and generous.

One of the clearest ways you can tell if someone's faith is real and has gotten deep into their heart, is they are generous. They reflect Jesus in the area of money. They hold their finances loosely, giving generously and cheerfully and in a manner that blesses others.

It says he gave worthily of the Lord, meaning he delighted to give, not begrudgingly or just because someone was taking an offering.

His generosity expresses itself in hospitality. He is taking in missionaries, strangers unknown to Gaius but befriended for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel.

Proverbs 11:24-25 One gives freely, yet grows all the richer;
another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.
25 Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.

This is Christian charity, to show kindness to those in need, to the poor, to show hospitality to Christian strangers.

Why should we help missionaries and evangelist and pastors? John gives three reasons.

First, they have gone out for the sake of the Name. It is pleasing to God to support those who go out for the sake of the truth, for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of the name of Jesus.

They are God's servants. It is the name of Jesus what they take to the nations. It is His Gospel they proclaim. There is no other name by which we can be saved.

We should welcome them and support them because of the One they serve.

Second, they accepted nothing from the Gentiles, from pagans. The gospel they offer is a free gospel, it is given without charge or even the appearance of gain. Those who don't know it should not be expected to value it or pay for it.

They have gone out, meaning they have left behind all they know, all that is familiar, all that is comfortable, for the sake of the Gospel. They have left behind jobs, careers, income, to obey a higher calling, for the sake of the name. Notice what they have done, the sacrifice they have made for the sake of Jesus.

They depended on the church, on the generosity of Christians. It is right for Christians and the church to support them.

Third, we ought to support those who are co-laborers in the truth, allies in the truth. Their work is also our work. We are partners with them on the front line of God's Gospel being spread, fellow workers in the truth.

We have a connection with them and with their work. When someone in heaven comes to them to thank them, they will also be thanking you to the extent you supported the work, financially and in prayer.

Some missionaries are clearer about this connection than others. It is a good thing when missionaries treat those who support them as equal partners in the work, team players. This is why we put a premium on having a relationship with those we support, going to them and having them come to us. It is important we know them and have a real relationship with them.

To invest in the advancing of the church is the noblest investment, the most promising and rewarding investment with the greatest most long-lasting return. We who know the great worth and value of the truth should be quick to invest in it and insure its advance.

We are all called to the Great Commission, but not all of us can physically go, so we can support those who do go. Some go, some send. Where we cannot go, our prayers and money and other support can go.

The church in Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas on the very first missionary journey. And they received them back to hear their report.

To this point, Steve F. added another challenge this morning. We might not be able to go across the ocean, but we can go across the street or across the field or across town.

Diotrephes, vss. 9-10.

Are you surprised at what John says about Diotrephes? Are you struck by how the Holy Spirit inspires the apostles to write down names of people who are a problem in the church?

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Philippi telling Euodia and Syntyche to get along. Paul told Timothy Demas deserted him and Alexander did him much harm, beware of him.

There are times when we are left no option for the sake of the health and unity of the church. Eternal things are at stake and false shepherds and false pastors and false teachers must be named so the sheep are warned. Jesus was clearest and hardest on those on the inside, not those on the outside.

John tells us at least four serious problems with Diotrephes' behavior.

First, he is speaking evil against John, against spiritual leaders God has given to the church. He is refusing to submit to spiritual authority and actually rejecting it. Not only is he disregarding John's authority, and not only is he speaking against it, but he has gone further to slander John with malicious gossip.

Some think the reference in verse 9 is to a letter John wrote and sent, but Diotrephes may have kept it from being read and shared with the church. He may have rejected the letter and whoever delivered it.

In order to be a good leader, you have to be a good follower. It is always a bad sign when a leader does not submit and accept accountability. This is not the mark of a good spiritual leader. He is lording it over others.

Second, Diotrephes refused to welcome and receive those who have been sent out to preach the gospel, these traveling missionaries. He stiff-armed them and refused to allow them to speak in the church.

I have always tried to receive those who come to us in the name of the Lord and give them an opportunity to share what God is doing in their ministries.

I made a special point this morning of welcoming Steve F., and saying blessed are you who comes in the name of the Lord. We should open the doors of the church and the doors of our homes to our brothers and sisters from all over the world.

Third, beyond refusing to accept these itinerate missionaries, he demanded others do the same and he went so far as to put out of the church those in the church that tried to extend and show hospitality.

This is like refusing to be friends with someone who likes someone you don't like.

Fourth, and this is the worst and John put it first. Diotrephes loved to be first. He is throwing his weight and his ego around. This is a man still living by the flesh and not by the Spirit of Christ. The person who loves to be first is a person who loves himself. He puts himself above the apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ.

John learned this lesson directly from Jesus much earlier in his life.

Matthew 20:25-28 Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

What a contrast to Jesus who said he came not to be served but to serve. He was meek and lowly of heart, He stooped to wash the disciples feet. Jesus didn't count equality with God something to be grasped but emptied Himself and humbled Himself to become like us.

Matthew 18:4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Ambition led to arrogance which lead to accusations and finally evil actions. We are all capable of this so we should take to heart and heed this warning to watch our motives, our tongues and our actions.

This sin is in all of us, me included. We are born with it. It will rise up in all of us at any opportunity. Let's pray for the grace to see it and to kill it before it kills us and our fellowship with each other. Before it kills our marriages.

The Spirit has put this in Scripture as a warning, as a mirror, as a call to examine our own hearts and see if there be any evil way in us.

Examine your life for pride, for arrogance, for being puffed up, full of yourself, self-centered. Think about it, you could hardly say something worse about a Christian in a church. "He always has to be first, go first, speak first."

Demetrius, vss. 11-12.

John ends his letter on a positive note with a contrast between Diotrephes and Demetrius who he holds him up for emulation and imitation. This is the difference between a self-centered Christian and a Christ-centered Christian.

John gives him high praise, three commendations, three references to his character.

He has a good report from everyone, and from the truth itself, and from John and those with him.

From the truth itself just means his life matches the Gospel truth. His walk matched his talk. This is a man after God's own heart.

John says they should imitate good. Mimic it, do what others do who do good. Scripture says we are to imitate God, but it also points out believers who are worthy of imitation. Be careful who you chose to imitate, notice their life and doctrine.

It is remarkable how many people are mentioned only once in Scripture. Like Ananias whom we will encounter next Sunday morning. People who may be footnotes in history but are important to God and to Jesus and His church. God loves to choose those who are lowly, who are small, who are not full of themselves but humbly walking with God and relying on Him daily.

John, vss. 13-15.

Conflict is a given in the church. Wherever there are sinners there will be conflict. John is setting an example for us in how to deal with conflict.

He doesn't ignore it and hope it will go away, he confronts it. He writes a letter, which was apparently ignored or tossed aside. He sends messengers or emissaries, and they are apparently rejected. He sends this letter with the clear intention that when he comes, we will deal with it face to face. This is all an act of love.

We must be willing to confront sin, even when and especially when it is in our leaders.

John does what a loving leader does, and he rebukes Diotrephes. We are left in the dark as to how Diotrephes received that rebuke and what he did with it. One hopes that he didn't remain proud and have a defensive reaction, but that he sees his sin and humbled himself and repented and became useful to John and to the church and to those who came as strangers into their midst.

He see evidence that John is the kind of pastor and leader worthy to be followed and imitated and there are those like Gaius and Demetrius who in fact are like him.

We see his pastors' heart, full of love and compassion for his sheep. He longs to see them and be with them.

Conclusion.

Someone observed this is the only place in the NT where believers are called friends. And so, we should be, brothers and sister, fellow workers, friends. Don't be enemies with each other, strive to be friends.

In Christ a former Greek pagan like Gaius and Jewish apostle like John can be friends and live in peace.

May we all continue to strive to seek peace and to live in harmony with each other as we imitate Christ.

And let us pray for one another and love each other and build each other up in the faith. The enemy is strong, and his attacks are relentless, but our Lord and Savior is Head of His Church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. Resist him that he might flee and flee to Christ.

Let us all live and learn and love and lead for the sake of the name, giving Jesus preeminence in everything. Let us live and serve together not out of selfish ambition, but humble servanthood.