

Dear Friends,

Scripture abounds with powerful examples, most of them, by far, positive examples that show us the living details of how to live our life of faith in service to Jesus and to others. Occasionally Scripture also shows us a bad example to remind us just how destructive ungodly conduct can be. Seldom does Scripture so vividly give us two examples, the good and the bad, side by side as we read in 3 John. John wants us to ponder our own lifestyle and to understand the fruits of both. In my early years as a pastor, I witnessed two similar examples. A "Demetrius" kind of man had a major health episode. When I visited him, he only wanted to talk about how good the Lord is and how much he loved the Lord's people. In that same church a few years later, I observed another brother, a man with good intentions, but who allowed the Diotrephes example to influence his conduct on a very public occasion. He spoke harsh, hateful words to an outsider, words that spread through the community. That church never overcame the

devastating impact those unchristian words had on its reputation.

What would be the outcome if we asked ourselves the soul-searching question, "Is my present conduct, thought, word, and deed, more like Demetrius or Diotrephes?" If people become familiar with our personal passions, will they discover a genuine devotion to Jesus and the service of others? Or will they see a passion for self and for our personal ideas that do not find their godly example on the pages of Scripture?

It is no stretch whatever to say that the future of our faith in this culture rests on our answer to these questions. No, the faith of Jesus shall not vanish. But our neglect of it could predict that the Lord will take it from us and give it to a people who bear its selfless, serving fruits. I fully understand that my years ahead are fewer by far than my years lived out. I long more and more as I grow older to see assuring evidences that the faith of Jesus shall reside here long after I have taken my leave and

gone home. Let this be our daily prayer. And let it also be our daily habit of life.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

3 John

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers. (3 John 1:4-5 KJV 1900)

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. (3 John 1:9 KJV 1900)

Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself: yea, and we also bear record; and ye know that our record is true. (3 John 1:12 KJV 1900)

The three “Letters” of John seem tightly related. They were likely written to one church or

to Christians in a particular region. 3 John was written to “*the well beloved Gaius,*” either a respected leader among the churches in that region or the pastor of the same church. Based on all three letters, John was well-known by his readers, and well aware of their culture and problematic issues.

John’s respect for Gaius is specifically related to his faithfulness, his steadfastness in the truth of the gospel, and his kind grace toward the believers with whom he worked. Verse 9 sets a noble goal for pastors, as well as the folks in the pew. Be faithful, but equally be kind and gracious to both the members of the church and to those outside the church who might be influenced by both gospel preaching and by the godly example of charitable grace in the members to give serious thought to the teaching of the gospel. Jesus set the same high mark for the eleven.

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:35 KJV 1900)

Always hold steadfastly to the truth of the gospel, especially in a culture where professing believers strive to compromise it. But be doubly sure to live its kind grace in your conduct toward other believers. Every church and every pastor are “*earthen vessels*,” (2 Corinthians 4:7 KJV), less than perfect representatives of their faith. But how do we as imperfect representatives of our faith treat each other? How do we talk about others when they are absent? How do we talk to them? Christians in our culture urgently need this lesson. How do Christians in our culture speak to, speak of, and treat Christians who hold to a different political view than theirs? To a different view of current events, far more than just COVID? Do we speak to and of them with love and respect? Or do we speak harsh and hateful words, professing ourselves superior to them because of our viewpoints? Given the prevalence of hateful words and conduct by professing Christian to professing Christian in such matters, is it any wonder that Christianity in our culture is steadily losing ground and numbers? If we want our Christian faith to grow in our culture, we must return to the gracious

habits of John's inspired writings—in all the New Testament books which he wrote. We can have the best, most articulate, sound and godly pastor in the country, but, if we chase people away from the church by our unkind words and deeds, we'll fail and decline. Some of the most healthy and spiritually prosperous churches I've known over the years had pastors of moderate pulpit presence, but they more than compensated by consistent love, grace, and gracious attention to their members and friends that set the godly example of loving grace which John emphasizes in all his New Testament writings.

Diotrephes or Demetrius, Which Will We Imitate?

John names two men in this church culture, both likely prominent men whom the people knew well. One man might have been embarrassed by his ungodly conduct being called out by John, and the other by his "*good report of all men.*" In my Sunday message to our church last week, I mentioned two classes of members who appear in many churches. One

member gives and does freely, but he is highly offended if his good deeds are not mentioned and praised. The other give and work just as freely, but they prefer to work quietly and without anyone even knowing what they do. I named one of our members who nicely fits the last—the good—example. Our church is richly blessed with several members who likewise work long and hard for the church, but who prefer to remain quietly in the shadows. What a blessing they are to our church!

How might a church in our time and pride-filled culture react to a respected pastor calling out two men in the church of similar opposite conduct? How might the men themselves react?

Diotrephes was motivated by ego, by his ambition and insatiable appetite for “*preeminence*.” He was so obsessed with personal superiority over others in the church that he prated (Spoke irrationally against) anyone who did not go along with his ideas, even bullying them out of the church. Professing Christians with this penchant may even boast of their ability to control others by their bully attitude and words when they would more wisely grieve

that inclination and work to repent of it. And like Diotrephes, professing Christians with this inclination, either directly or indirectly, may drive members or interested inquirers away from the church rather than attracting people to it.

In today's emotionally charged culture, a member too devoted to one political party or personality might speak or act more in favor of their political interests than their faith and alienate believers who do not share their political interest. Even Christians are liable to becoming too self-focused on their own ideas or abilities for their spiritual health. I use political interests as the example, but this unhealthy divergence from Jesus and the gospel might also appear in the form of one's education ("I have a Master's Degree, and you are only a high school graduate. How dare you question my ideas?"), or financial status. When we neglect a healthy—a New Testament—spiritual outlook, carnal pride can feed on anything about us as superior to others, even to other believers in the faith. When any of us struggle with this problem, we need to revisit Paul's teaching in Philippians 2, as one example of a leading New Testament theme of

other-serving authentic Christian faith. We might do well also to read about some of the leading preachers in our history. A few noble examples come to mind. 1) John Warburton, “Mercies of a Covenant God.” Warburton was a faithful and highly blessed man whose poverty on occasion required him and his family to live in the basement of a Christian friend who used the basement as a “Potato cellar.” Have you ever smelled the putrid odor of a rotten potato? Imagine living in an enclosed room with that odor. 2) William Huntington, a highly blessed preacher-pastor who lived in an era of highly educated preachers, while his “Claim to fame” was that he was a “Coal heaver” prior to the Lord’s calling him to the gospel. His preaching was so blessed that it filled churches while those highly educated and prideful preachers preached to empty pews. One event will illustrate Huntington and the era in which he lived. The highly educated preachers of the day routinely signed their personal letters to include reference to their degrees, DD,” “ThD.” Huntington once signed a personal letter, “William Huntington, SS.” When someone asked Huntington the

meaning of “SS,” he replied that it referred to the only worthy credential any Christian should claim, “Sinner saved.” Amen to that. ***What trait or quality most defines you or me?*** Our pride in our political alignment? Our claim to information that most people either do not know or reject? Or our identity with the Lord Jesus Christ? Are we prepared to join the Warburtons and the Huntingtons of our Christian heritage? When insightful and wise Christians quietly observe us, will they relate us to Diotrephes or to Demetrius? Soul-searching indeed.

What is Jesus’ personal description of Himself to His tired, discouraged people?

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. (Matthew 11:29 KJV 1900; emphasis added)

Jesus did not appeal to us by His deity or by His amazing ability to do good and to overcome evil. He appeals to us by two personal qualities that He faithfully and frequently taught us to cultivate.

1. ***“I am meek...in heart.”*** The graceful quality of meekness is one that is gentle and mild. While Jesus was occasionally fierce to unbelievers, He always responded to His followers in this gentle, mild, and nurturing manner. Not only does this quality make Him more approachable to us in our times of tired discouragement, but it equally reminds us of His example, His commandment for us to practice—as faithfully and consistently as He.

2. ***“I am lowly in heart.”*** Perhaps one word best describes “lowly” as Jesus used the word here, “Unpretentious.” As Paul powerfully describes Jesus in Philippians 2:5-8, despite being God manifest in human flesh, Jesus did not forcefully demand that people respect His godhood. Rather, Paul reminds us; Jesus humbled Himself to live prior to His public ministry as a carpenter’s son and then a carpenter Himself. At the end, He willingly humbled Himself to a shameful and scandalous death by crucifixion. Again, Jesus becomes the one worthy example for

us to follow in our own conduct. Oxford Shorter English Dictionary defines pretentious as “Making excessive or unwarranted claims to merit or importance.” Both in His self-description and in His whole lifestyle, Jesus exuded the mirror opposite to this self-promoting attitude. As with meekness, herein Jesus reminds us of His example—and His commandment—that we imitate Him in our personal attitude and lifestyle. Whether in the pulpit or in the pew, one of the gravest threats to faithful authentic Christian life and witness appears when professing believers ignore Jesus’ words and example in these two qualities and make their personal Christianity all about self-promotion. Instead of living out “It is all about Him,” they sadly live out “It is all about me.” This attitude wholly neutralizes and destroys our faithful witness to Jesus and His way.

One example from my personal history. My uncle, Elder J. D. Holder, was highly respected during his ministry throughout the southern region of our country and beyond, as

well as being one of my dearest mentors. A man who witnessed this event told me about it. During my uncle's prime, he preached at a large regional meeting in west Tennessee. After the service ended, a well-known man approached my uncle, "Elder Holder, I've been a Primitive Baptist for many years. By far, the sermon you preached this morning is the most powerful sermon I've heard in my lifetime." My uncle quietly looked over his glasses at the man in silence for a few seconds. Then he spoke, "Brother, the old devil tells me the same thing almost every time I step out of the pulpit." And with those words, my uncle simply turned and walked away. He regarded his ministry as about Jesus, not himself.

Shall we allow pride and self to dominate and corrupt our faith and our witness in Diotrephes' manner? Or shall we follow Jesus' example and grow our reputation in the Demetrius lifestyle? How strongly we need the powerful lesson of 3 John!

Elder Joe Holder