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The Third Epistle of John: An Introduction

Today we come to the Third Epistle of John and the theme of Service in the Kingdom of God. With that, I am reminded of that time in Jonah's life when the prophet sat on the east side of Nineveh and lamented the fact that God had forgiven the pagan city.

Like many of God's people in the Old Testament, Jonah hated Gentiles and longed for their ruin. That is why when he was called to preach the gospel to the capital city of Assyria, Jonah went in the opposite direction. Well you know the rest of the story:

- God humbled the prophet such that he actually did preach in the streets of Nineveh.
- The city repented of their sin.
- And God took compassion and so forgave them.

Yet this just served to anger Jonah for that is exactly what he feared would happen. Accordingly, Jonah went east of the city, sat down in the dust, and lamented the grace and kindness of God. That He might teach the prophet, God ordained a plant to sprout up beside him and grow that Jonah might be delivered from the heat of the sun as he sat in its shade. But then a worm came and killed the plant such that Jonah sat under the scorching heat lamenting now the day of his birth.

It seems that Jonah had a place in his heart for a plant but not that of a Gentile. And from this the prophet's true motive when it came to ministry was brought to light. If it made Jonah comfortable, God's calling and will was acceptable regardless of what happened. But if it threatened his comfort, Jonah was moved to anger with God.

Jonah 4:9, "Then God said to Jonah, 'Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?' And he said, 'I have good reason to be angry, even to death.'"

And yet it wasn't only Jonah. Seeking and serving Christ on account of faulty motives has always plagued God's people:

John 6:26, "Jesus answered them and said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled.'"

The Players

What ought to impel us in ministry? Why ought we to seek or serve the Lord? This morning we are going to answer these questions as we are introduced to the Third Epistle of John. Notice with me first the players of 3 John.

3 John 1, "The elder unto the well beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth."

The elder. Unlike modern letters which leave their readers guessing as to the identity of their author until the very end, ancient writings began by naming their author. Accordingly this epistle begins with the ascription, "the elder." Who was this elder? I won't go into all the details as I did when we began our study in 2 John; however we know that "the elder" here is John, the Apostle of Christ. He wrote 3 John around 85 A.D. which would have made him an elderly man. Yet John's usage of, "the elder," was not a means to stress his age, but the fact that he was writing as a shepherd of the flock of God- and so one thoroughly concerned for the body.

Why the emphasis? As one who had walked with Christ for many years, who watched the church progress from its infancy, through its youth, and now was advancing to a more settled maturity, John was concerned for the churches of Asia Minor. An entirely new generation of leader had arisen in the church, many of which were leading God's people astray. And so John penned this epistle to express his pastoral concern not for a church body, but for one of his dear disciples in the Lord... Gaius.

To the beloved Gaius. In the Bible there are four Gaius's mentioned: There's the Gaius of Macedonia who was seized along with Aristarchus during the Ephesian riot of Acts 19:29. There is the Gaius of Derbe who travelled with Paul to Jerusalem.¹ There also is the Gaius of Corinth who was baptized by Paul.² The church met in his house, and Paul stayed with him on his third Corinthian visit.³ Origen reported that this Gaius became the first Bishop of Thessalonica. Then there is the Gaius of our epistle who according to tradition was later appointed by John as the Bishop of Pergamum.

¹ Tradition holds that it was this Gaius to whom John wrote 3 John, cf. *Apostolical Constitution* 7.46.9. Compare Acts 20:4

² Compare 1 Corinthians 1:14

³ Compare Romans 16:23

Many throughout church history have sought to link the Gaius of Derbe who ministered with and to Paul with the Gaius of 3 John, but it is all conjecture. For you see, Gaius was a very popular name throughout Roman history. When it came to the naming of a Roman child there was very little freedom for the citizen of Rome. The typical Roman male had three to four names. There was his

- Nomen (lit., “name”) - this was based on the clan from which he came. Examples: Claudius, Julius, Antonius, and Valerius.
- Cognomen (lit. “With the name”) - this came after the Nomen and was the name of the family line within the clan. Examples: Galarius, Novellius, Quintilus, and Tacitus. These two are like our last names; we have no say in them. They are determined by our family line.
- Agnomen (lit. “added to the name”) - this was added after the birth of the child when characteristics about the person became obvious. In this way it served as a nickname. Example: Superbus which means “Haughty”, Pulcher which means “Handsome”, Augustus which means “Majestic,” and Germanicus which means “the German Conqueror”.
- Praenomen (lit. “forename”) - this was an individual’s given name most commonly used by one’s intimate associates (his family or friends) - like our first names. Unlike the Nomen and Cognomen, the choice of one’s Praenomen was based solely on the desire of the parents. As such, like our naming practice, it was limited by imagination. Accordingly, it may be a surprise to discover that there were only 40 different Praenomens used in Roman history. And during the Apostolic age 17 Praenomens comprised 98% of all Roman names. And of the 17, there were 3 which comprised 59% of all Praenomens; they were Lucius, Marcus, and Gaius!

As such, there would have been tens of thousands of men who bore the name of Gaius in John’s day. In fact so many, that without definitive proof, it is impossible to link any Roman who bore that name with another.

When it comes to 3 John, we are at a loss when it comes to identifying this man. However, we aren’t at a loss when it comes to understanding what this Gaius meant to John. For notice, the Apostle here identifies him as “the beloved Gaius.” This meant that Gaius was far more to John than simply a contact in a local church. Rather, John clearly had a relationship with this man in which the Apostle referred to him as one of his “children” (verse 3). Accordingly, John knew this man intimately. He most likely had

- Led him to the Lord.
- Spent much time with him.
- Discipled him.
- Sent him out into ministry.

That’s Gaius. Then there was Demetrius.⁴ It is believed that he is the bearer of this epistle. And as with the name of “Gaius,” “Demetrius” was a common name at this time- translated it means, “belonging to Demeter”- the goddess of grain and the harvest. Accordingly it too is impossible to link this man with the “Demetrius” of Acts 19. Rather, all biographical information on him is derived from this letter.

So what do we know about Demetrius from this verse? Not much. Only that he was a man of God well-known by all in the environs of Ephesus. Most likely a missionary, Demetrius was here presented to Gaius as a man worthy of emulation. And according to the *Apostolical Constitution* (an ancient document written in the 4th Century) John later appointed him Bishop of Philadelphia. I. Howard

⁴ Compare 3 John 12

Marshall wrote this:

[Demetrius] is doubtless meant as an example of the good which Gaius is to imitate, but the real reason for mentioning him here at the end of the main part of the letter is to write a note of commendation for him to Gaius. It can be taken as virtually certain that he was the bearer of the letter (cf. Rom. 16:1f.) and as highly probable that he was a traveling missionary, possibly one of the group which had been made unwelcome by Diotrephes.⁵

With this we are brought to the final “Player” when it comes to this epistle Diotrephes.

3 John 9, “I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.”

As with Gaius and Demetrius, there is very little that can be derived about Diotrephes from the New Testament. His name means, “Zeus-reared” and was most commonly used of ancient noble families of Greece which could explain why he was such a proud and arrogant man. Yet that is conjecture. All we have on this man is what we read in 3 John. From this epistle we conclude that Diotrephes was the leader and so THE pastor of the church of which Gaius was a member. Yet he wasn’t a servant-leader—the type of man whom Christ spoke about in Matthew 20.

Matthew 20:25-27, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.”

Diotrephes was the opposite of this. In fact he is described here literally as, “one who loves to put himself first.” The language suggests a self-promoted demagogue rather than a constitutionally elected pastor. In his church, ministry revolved around him! And though he is not here charged with heresy, nevertheless his selfish, power-hungry style of leadership was almost just as damaging. Notice

3 John 10, “For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and he forbids those who desire *to do so*, and puts *them* out of the church.”

Do you get the picture? A wolf in sheep’s clothing not only snuck into this church, but made himself its leader. And anyone and everyone who didn’t agree with him or support him NOT ONLY was attacked, mocked, ridiculed, and persecuted, BUT- if they were members of his church- were excommunicated! Dr. John MacArthur observed this:

There have always been proud, egotistical, self-promoting people, who try to usurp authority, seize a place of preeminence, and elevate themselves over others, even God. They tend to gravitate to and even manipulate themselves into positions of power, influence, and prominence... Diotrephes was guilty of spiritual pride of the rankest kind. His attitude was that of a self-promoting demagogue, who refused to serve anyone but wanted all to serve him.⁶

⁵ *The Epistles of John*, NICNT, p. 93.

⁶ *1-3 John*, MNTC, p. 252, 257.

F. F. Bruce added this:

Twenty centuries of church history have witnessed many of his successors: the lust for power, from whatever form of inner insecurity it may spring, is always a curse, and pre-eminently so in the realm of religion.⁷

Now if you place each of these men side-by-side the contrast couldn't be starker. There was the Apostle John who refused to push his power, but rather sought to be identified as a shepherd of the souls of men. There is Gaius who viewed his life as a living sacrifice and so served ones he didn't even know. There's Demetrius who was attested by all to be a man of God a man of the word. And lastly and certainly least, there was Diotrephes who was nothing, and yet thought he was everything. With this we are brought to "The Occasion" for the writing of this epistle.

The Occasion

3 John 9, "I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say."

This is the situation which preceded the writing of this epistle. As we have made reference many times, there was a fraternity which the establishing of God's Kingdom produced in and throughout Redemptive History. As God continued His work of Redemption subsequent to the Fall, the Lord advanced Redemptive History by approaching a specific people and gathering them into a clan.⁸ Accordingly from Abraham onward, God's redemptive work was confined to a Covenant Community.

To be part of this Covenant Community was to enjoy the blessings of God's protection, care, oversight, and leading. To be outside of this community was to be a stranger and an alien to the things of the Lord. Now for 1,800 years up through the time of Christ, there was solidarity amongst the people of God on account of the Covenant such that as a member of the household of God you didn't stay at the local inns of the cities to which you travelled for business. Rather you found brethren in the city to which you travelled, and it was expected that they'd welcome you into their home.

And so Covenant hospitality was a common practice when it came to supporting traveling brothers and sisters in the Lord. Yet it became particularly important when Christian missionaries were sent out by the apostolic church. In these cases, the loving responsibility for their support and aid came from the churches in the cities to which they came in the name of Christ. Without this support, the gospel ministry could not have taken place.

Now John on his part had sent many of these missionaries into the Kingdom of God, many of whom Gaius had helped on their way. Notice John's words:

3 John 5-8, "Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially *when they are* strangers; and they bear witness to your love before the church; and you will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God [that is, well supported]. For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to

⁷ *The Epistles of John*, p. 153.

⁸ Compare Genesis 12 - 17

support such men, that we may be fellow workers with the truth.”

John was responsible for sending many of these missionaries out into the world. And with his sending of these missionaries into the Kingdom of God, the Apostle gave them letters of commendation, instructing the churches to which they came to support them. Well Diotrephes didn't respect John; accordingly John wrote a letter to him (3 John 9a) which Diotrephes evidently tore up. See Diotrephes had very little regard for John. Life for him was about controlling other people by raising himself up and pushing other people down. As such, when a missionary came having been endorsed by John, Diotrephes rejected the missionaries and even forbade any in his congregation from helping them.

Again this could have had serious consequences for this could have resulted in grave harm and danger coming to a missionary who arrived late at night expecting a place to stay and yet being cast out into the cold. So the irony therefore of 2 and 3 John is that while 2 John was written to a church that was supporting people whom they ought NOT to help, 3 John was written because there was a church that was refusing to support people who OUGHT to be helped. The former did it out of naiveté; the latter did it because their shepherd-wolf had ascended into the chair of Christ and so ruled with severity and cruelty.

In fact would you notice the root behind Diotrephes love of “being first” is one and the same as what Paul said of Christ.

Colossians 1:18: “He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.”

The Concern

In his love of power, control, and attention, Diotrephes had usurped the throne of Christ such that when it came to the work of the Lord, he called the shots, not God! That is the occasion of this epistle. Genuine ministers of Christ were serving in the name of the Lord and Diotrephes not only refused to allow his congregation to support them, he excommunicated any who did. And that brings us to the concern of the epistle.

3 John 1, “The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.”

This could also be rendered, “whom I love in accordance with truth.” Love here is not a sappy emotion, but a deliberate, quantifiable act. When John said that the love he had for Gaius was in accordance with truth, he had something very specific in mind. Recall the context, in verse 10 we read of Diotrephes refusing to help genuine servants of the Lord on account of pride. Yet in verses 5-8 we read of the very real need for this help, for in doing so Gaius and the church NOT ONLY would be providing for the genuine needs of a missionary BUT they themselves would participate in the bringing forth of the Kingdom of God for which they prayed.⁹

3 John 8b, “... [they would be] fellow workers with truth.”

The clear implication and so the obvious concern of John is that Gaius fulfill his calling regardless of the

⁹ Compare Matthew 6:10

despot controlling his local church or for that matter, regardless of the persecution, hardship, inconvenience, or suffering that might come his way as a result. See, the word of God is very clear as to how the Kingdom of God is to be extended when it comes to a body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-13, “And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

Paul is NOT describing the threefold work of a pastor/teacher, BUT the linear outworking of the Kingdom of God. God gives leaders // that they might equip the body // that the body might do the work of service unto the building up of the body of Christ! That is how Christ intended the Kingdom of God to grow.

Ephesians 4:15-16, “...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him, who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

These texts couldn't be any clearer. God engifts each and everyone of us for the purpose of building up the body of Christ.¹⁰ Thus the calling that rests upon the child of God is the exercise of their gifts, supported by the leadership, unto the church's growth in grace. In this context notice the purpose of church leadership is to equip the body of Christ to fulfill this end. This equipping will involve...

- Teaching.
- Reproof.
- Correction.
- Training.

...accordingly it will require submission in the Lord on the part of the body to their pastors- and so we read this:

Hebrews 13:17, “Obey your leaders, and submit *to them*; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account...”

However, when church power is run amuck such that decrees violate the teaching of the word of God, we all have a responsibility to reject such a decree. For, in the words of the Apostles to the religious leaders of their day who forbade them from speaking in the name of Christ:

Acts 4:19-20, “...whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.”

In a nut shell, that was John's Concern here. That was the objective of John's love for Gaius. The elder personally had disciplined Gaius and taught him the privilege and obligation of ministry. Lest he run in vain, Gaius was to view himself as a vessel in the hands of God whose life no longer was his own, but at the free disposal of God. Accordingly, nothing was more important when it came to ministry than

¹⁰ Compare 1 Corinthians 12:7 and 1 Peter 4:10

co-laboring with Christ unto the heralding of His kingdom- that is how you become a "...fellow worker with the truth" (3 John 8b).

And such is the privilege and calling that rests upon our lives as well.

John 6:27a, "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life..."

Do you realize that in Christ, what you do can impact eternity? Accordingly, we are called to live not for today, but for eternity.

2 Corinthians 6:1: "And working together *with Him*, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain."

To receive God's grace in vain is to spend your salvation on yourself. In contrast, to live for Christ is to invest in eternity.

Revelation 14:13: "And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, 'Write, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!"' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.'"

See when God redeemed us by His grace, He granted us the greatest privilege imaginable; that is, participating in a work whose impact will reach unto eternity. And so confronting us each and every day is these questions:

- Will I live for myself, my own wants, desires, and needs? ****or****
- Will I invest in eternity as a servant of the Living God?

Hebrews 11:25-26, "[Moses chose] rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward."

Such a choice confronts each and every one of us daily! Shall I give up what I cannot keep to gain what I cannot lose? Shall I "work for the food which perishes or for the food that endures to eternal life"? Will my life revolve around Christ's honor and needs rather than my own? Thus Paul encouraged the brethren in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not *in vain* in the Lord."

John was concerned for Gaius in this regard and so encouraged him to fulfill his calling regardless of the cost. And yet there is a caveat here: If you and I think that Christianity is about personal pleasure, the benefit of self, fulfillment, ease of days, and the like, we not only will miss our calling, but we will stray very close to adulterating the Kingdom of God- using Christ for personal gain! Wasn't that the error of Diotrephes?

- He thought Christianity was about him.

- He thought church office existed for him to gratify the desires of the flesh.
- And so he...
 - Led because it pleased him.
 - Taught because it gave him pleasure.
 - Served because it made him feel good.

...and in the process he usurped the place of Christ by making Christianity, office, worship, and the like a means to his own end!

And yet it is not only Diotrephes! Redemptive history and church history are filled with people who have used the Kingdom of God to further their own selfish agenda. Christ speaking of the Pharisees said this:

Matthew 23:6-7, "...they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi [my teacher]."

When you think of all the testifying miracles that Christ performed in His first advent it is shocking that the religious establishment at the time didn't flock to Christ and accept Him as their Messiah! Yet when you understand that by the first century A.D. Judaism had become a big business with financial kickbacks, honor, authority, and the like, it is no wonder why they crucified the Lord. Jesus threatened their way of life. What was the last straw for Judas who used Christ's money purse unto his own pleasure? After a woman offered a costly vile of perfume to Christ, poured it at His feet, and then was rebuked by Judas, Christ said this:

John 12:7-8, "Let her alone, in order that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me."

Judas reached the breaking point when Christ denied him money.¹¹

2 Corinthians 2:17, "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God."

By the writing of 2 Corinthians, false ministers had arrived on the scene and were preaching the word of God for money and self gain- they were "peddling the word of God." Accordingly, the Kingdom of God became to them no different than pottery, clothing, services, or wares- just another way to make a buck! *Just another way to...*

- *Feel good about themselves.*
- *Promote their self esteem.*
- *Entertain themselves.*

So why ought we to serve in God's Kingdom?

- We have been forgiven much, Luke 7:46.
- Out of love therefore, we want to serve the Lord, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; John 3:30.

¹¹ Compare Mark 14:10

And so in our marriages,¹² rearing children,¹³ and work¹⁴ we do it all as unto the Lord! Now with this, let me close by sharing with you a test which has served me rather well in the twenty years that I've been in ministry: If it wears me out emotionally (that is, leads me to the resenting of people), I am not serving as unto the Lord, but ministering in my own strength. Truly, kingdom work is energizing.¹⁵ Thus, if instead of being energized for ministry, my labor leaves me angry and upset at people and/or resenting the work of the Lord, clearly something else has been motivating (usually the praises of men or a floating sense of duty). It certainly wasn't the Lord.

John 3:30, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

May God give us the grace so to live our lives!

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word is published regularly.

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon (the last few minutes were not recorded because of a power outage during the sermon) and these notes can be found at [Introduction to 3 John](#). The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on May 17, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.

¹² Compare Ephesians 5:22,

¹³ Compare Ephesians 6:1

¹⁴ Compare Colossians 3:23

¹⁵ Compare Isaiah 40:31