

DIOTREPES AND DEMETRIUS
(SUNDAY, MAY 5, 2019)

Scripture: 10 Words; 3 John 9-13

INTRODUCTION

Does it help you clean your house when you know other people have messy houses? No, but realizing that other people have messy houses might encourage you to realize that you are not the only one with a messy house.

You still need to clean your house.

Knowing that other churches have problems doesn't remove the duty we have to properly deal with our problems.

But our text shows us that serious problems facing churches is not something new.

Scripture is very honest. It doesn't cover over messy, sinful situations.

John who was a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ had to deal with a real problem among the Christians he helped to shepherd.

Pride and self-importance are always dangerous individually and dangerous for local churches.

Watch out for Diotrephes. Support Demetrius.

Do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.

We will look at verses 9-13 in two parts: 1) Diotrephes and Demetrius in verses 9-12; 2) John's Closing Words in verses 13 and 14.

1) DIOTREPES AND DEMETRIUS, 3 JOHN 9-11

What was going on in the church or churches that John was writing?

There is much for us to learn in these verses, but we are not given all the details to be dogmatic in our interpretations.

In verse 9, John says, **I wrote to the church.**

Is this speaking of 2 John? Some good commentators argue for this.

Other commentators think this was a different letter that John wrote to Diotrephes; and he rejected what John was telling him.

As we look at 3 John, two possible situations come to mind.

It is possible that Diotrophes and Gaius both were pastors of two separate but related churches. Obviously Diotrophes was a horrible pastor and Gaius was a faithful pastor.

Perhaps more likely is that Diotrophes was the main pastor of just one church and that Gaius was part of that church and in a very difficult situation.

Listen to one commentator describe what might have been going on:

Since the presbyter's [John's] earlier communication to Diotrephes had been rejected, he probably wrote a fresh letter (3 John) to Gaius, hoping that he would share its contents with the congregation (hence the fairly formal style of vv 9-10). Moreover, if Gaius lived at a distance from the church, making his home a welcome resting-place for itinerant preachers who were traveling from one point of the Johannine community to another (cf vv 5-8), and if his health was not strong (see the *comment* on v 2), this would explain both the presbyter's need to keep Gaius up-to-date with the problems in "the congregation" (the one common to Gaius and Diotrephes, in which case the definite article "the" is fully justified), and also the fact that Gaius was evidently not expected to journey to the church in advance of [John] the elder for a confrontation with Diotrephes.¹

What is clear is that Diotrophes was causing real problems.

¹ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC 51; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 354.

John needed to give important instruction dealing with this situation in writing. He would do more later when he came as we see in verse 10.

The name Diotrophes means “reared by Zeus, nursling of Zeus.”²

Some suggest that his name implies that he came from a wealthy or noble, ancient family.

What we do know and what stands out is John’s comment that Diotrophes loves to have the preeminence.

He is a lover of being first among them.

This, thankfully, is the only time this word is found in Scripture, though there are other examples of those who loved to be first.

What we do see in Diotrophes is an ancient example of what has been a problem affecting local churches since the days of the apostles.

We might expect this in sports, entertainment, and even in business.

It is not pretty, but it is understandable.

The great danger is when a spirit of pride comes into a local church. Here it is very, very dangerous.

Robert Yarbrough reminded me that a one-time John himself or at least his mother was driven by selfish ambition.³

Do you remember the account in Matthew 20?

Matt. 20:20 Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.

21 And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.”

² Stott, 233.

³ Yarbrough, 379.

22 But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able.”

23 So He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but *it is for those* for whom it is prepared by My Father.”

Jesus ended this discussion with these words:

Matthew 20:27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

I think we can say this. John certainly took to heart the words of our Lord.

And we must also.

Pride doesn't always look the same among us, but it originates from the same source – a focus on me rather than a focus on God and others first.

Someone has said that pride is like a beard. It grows and has to be cut down every day.

Pride is the only disease known to man that makes everyone else sick except the one who has it.⁴

I find it so amazing that this Diotrophes was so filled with himself that he rejected the authority, instruction, and representatives who were sent by the Apostle John.

Here was John, the lifelong friend of the Lord Jesus Christ, but being opposed by someone who claimed to be serving God and Jesus Christ.

Does it make sense? No, it doesn't, but that is how irrational sin is. It turns things upside down.

The third thing described here about Diotrophes is in verse 10 – prating against us with malicious words.

⁴ *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, 288.

Do you use the word prate or prating? It is not a common word in our English translations or our vocabulary today.

Prov. 10:8 The wise in heart will receive commands, But a **prating** fool will fall.

Prov. 10:10 He who winks with the eye causes trouble, But a **prating** fool will fall.

The word in Greek means to speak that which makes no sense.

Diotrophes was saying not just ridiculous things but also evil things about others

Further, he was not receiving those who deserved to be helped. And he didn't stop here.

Those who wanted to give proper help, he tried to stop them.

And finally, he either was successful or he tried to put faithful Christians out of the church, a form of improper excommunication.⁵

There are details we don't know, but we do have enough to appreciate that this Diotrophes was a real problem.

One commentator observed insightfully:

Personal vanity still lies at the root of most dissensions in every local church today.⁶

This discussion leads to the command of verse 11.

Do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.

The verb imitate comes from the Greek verb which means to mimic. It is used 4 times in the NT, three times in the positive and here it is in the negative.

Paul in 2 Thess. 3:9 wrote:

2 Th. 3:9 not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us.

Why would John have to write this to someone like Gaius?

⁵ Yarbrough, 380.

⁶ Stott, 235.

It is a reminder that we are not as strong as we think we are.

In the situation that Gaius was facing, he was under pressure not simply to do the same wicked things that Diotrophes was doing but to compromise and to keep from doing what he should be doing.

The remainder of verse 11 sets forth the basic moral test found a number of times in 1 John.

The ability to do that which is good, that which is truly pleasing to God, comes as a result of being supernaturally born or fathered by God.

Those who do evil have not seen God.

Isn't that an interesting description?

Statements like this reveal the depths of John's theology.

Think of the desire of Moses to see God's glory.

Moses was given a partial glimpse of God's glory because no man can see the fullness of God's glory and live.

In Exodus 33:11 we have the powerful testimony of Moses in terms of his communion with God.

Ex. 33:11 So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.

Obviously, John in verse 11 is not saying we can see God directly.

But to be born again, to be given new spiritual life by God is to be so transformed that you are now called to live in the very presence of God.

And it is this working of God's grace in conjunction with His call in your life, that leads to you serving God.

None of us do so perfectly. We will fail in many ways. We will always have to confess our sins, but God's work of grace continues to draw us to God's truth and to desiring to live in His presence.

So, in no way is John saying by doing good you become born of God.

No, you first must be born again, you must be given new life in order to do that which is truly pleasing in God's sight.

John's statement also gives a warning.

You might think you are a Christian. You might be the pastor of a church even, but that is not what saves you.

Have you been brought truly to the place of repentance and faith in God?

It is very likely the case that John is calling into question the testimony of Diotrophes because of his pride, his malicious words, and detestable actions.⁷

In great contrast to Diotrophes, John was sending to Gaius and the church a faithful man named Demetrius.

We know from Acts 19 and the city of Ephesus that there was a silversmith who also was named Demetrius. This is obviously not that same person.

John says that Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone.

Further he has a good testimony from the truth itself.

Truth is key to John and his three letters.

Demetrius is in line with the truth of Scripture.

I think this is another important witness given our age of feeling.

Yes, we want to be loving and considerate. But we also want to walk in light of God's truth. It is not just our own subjective feelings that matter.

⁷ Stott, 236; MacArthur, s.v. 3 John 11.

Third, John says he brings a positive report concerning Demetrius.

Notice in verse 12 that John uses the plural pronoun, **we**. The “we” probably is what is called an **editorial plural**. John is speaking of himself, but he does so with a plural reference.⁸

And then notice the final words of verse 12.

We have already noted that John does not throw around his authority.

He writes not as the Mighty Apostle John but as the elder.

But here at the end of verse 12, John does assert rightfully his authority – you know that our testimony, our witness, is true.

It is a rightful way we can say of pulling rank.⁹

There is a place for using legitimate authority, and this is one example where it is done properly.

2) JOHN'S CLOSING WORDS, 3 JOHN 13-14

If you look at the previous page in your Bibles, you see that the final verses of 3 John are similar to the final verses of 2 John.

This is a short letter. We might wish that John had given more detail on some things, but the brevity of the letter is not because John had little to say.

There was plenty for John to say.

But he did not wish to write with pen and ink.

Rather John hoped to be able to visit Gaius.

By visiting, John would be able to better handle the situation with Diotrophes. John would also enjoy a face-to-face visit with Gaius.

⁸ Yarbrough, 383.

⁹ Yarbrough, 383.

I mentioned several weeks ago that we are blessed by being able to communicate at a distance with just about anyone in the world.

Technology, however, is not a substitute for being physically present with others.

In 2 John, John wrote about the joy that a visit would bring.

Here John leaves a blessing of peace and shared greetings.

Peace is not common in John's three letters.

It is a significant blessing in light of the conflict that was taking place in Gaius's church.

Peace here stands for the God's covenant blessing, protection, and provision in all its fullness.

And we know this peace is enjoyed because of what Christ has done.

This is why we have peace with God and enjoy the *shalom* that God alone can bring.

What is also significant in this final verse of 3 John is the word used two times, friends.

Paul never used this particular word in all of his letters. Outside the gospels and Acts, the word is used only in James and 3 John.

Probably the most significant text that could be compared to what we have here is John 15.

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. **14** You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. **15** No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

Those connected with John, the friends, shared their greeting.

And John wanted Gaius to give a specific greeting to each one who was part of the church.

John Stott wrote:

Christians should not lose their individual identity and importance in the group. God surely means each local fellowship to be sufficiently small and closely knit for the

pastors and the members to know each other personally and be able to greet each other by name. The Good Shepherd calls his own sheep by name (John 10:3); undershepherds and sheep should know each other by name also.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

It is never wrong to pray for peace, to want to live in a family, a local church that is marked by love and peace rather than by strife and problems.

If a church is composed of those who all claim to know the Lord Jesus Christ and desire to walk in His truth and to live out the truth of the gospel, how can there not be peace?

The problem is that we are not consistent as we should be with our profession and our actions.

How we need to be convicted and guided daily by God's truth.

Do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.

One final application that I leave with you here is John's burden for the local church he was writing and for the universal church.

While it is right to pray for peace and work for peace, we must never let this desire lead to a selfishness, a focus just on ourselves.

Listen in closing to the words of Scripture found in Phil. 2:3-4.

3 *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.* **4** *Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

¹⁰ Stott, 240.

Prayer

Hymn 364

BENEDICTION: HEB. 12:1-3

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.