

3 John

by Daniel Steele

The sermon on 3 John explores the contrasting behaviors of Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius to illustrate key Christian virtues and vices.

Scripture: 3 John 1:4

Topics: "Christian Living", "Church Leadership"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the Third Epistle of John, highlighting the characters of Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius as examples for modern believers to learn from. Gaius is commended for his full-orbed Christian life, standing firm in the truth and showing hospitality. In contrast, Diotrephes is portrayed as a self-seeking individual who rejects authority and causes division in the church. Demetrius, on the other hand, receives a good report for his moral uprightness and Christian excellence, serving as a positive example to follow.

Transcript

HALF-HOURS WITH JOHN'S EPISTLES

THE THIRD EPISTLE OF JOHN.

FOR the historical setting of this Epistle see Introduction, [Purpose & Historical Setting].

The record of this brief letter in the sacred Canon was probably designed by the spirit of inspiration to afford a portrait of some first century church members. "Brief as it is, it has the true 'note' of inspiration -- that indefinable but unmistakable something which is found in all the Bible, and is found nowhere else. It speaks to a person and of persons. The church is the background against which the figures of three individuals stand out in bold relief -- Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius," of whom we have no other glimpse in history. As we study them to avoid their faults and imitate their virtues, we will discover that behind these ancient names stand modern characters.

1. "Gaius." In the momentary light which falls upon him in this Epistle we clearly see a full-orbed and symmetrical Christian. He is not to be identified with either Gaius of Macedonia (Acts xix. 29), Gaius of Derbe (Acts xx. 4), or Gaius of Corinth (Rom. xvi. 23). Gaius was a name as common among the Romans as Smith is with us.

"Whom I love in truth," or love truly. The word "wellbeloved" implies that the whole circle of the Christian friends of Gaius cherished the same affection for him.

2. "I pray that in all things." Here the R. V. corrects a misleading translation of the A. V., which represents John as placing health and prosperity above all things.

"And be in health." The inference is natural that the bodily health of Gaius was infirm. The wish for his prosperity may imply that his worldly affairs were not in the best condition. His spiritual life was healthy, vigorous and progressive, so that John could form no higher wish for him than that he might prosper in temporal things in the same measure. If he was a millionaire in grace this would make him a millionaire in gold. "The verse is a model for all friendly wishes of good fortune to others."

3. "When brethren . . . bare witness unto thy truth." This implies that Gaius had stood as a rock against the assaults made by the enemies of Christian truth.

"Even as thou walkest in the truth." He was an example of the truth which he championed. "Defenders of the faith have not always been lovers of the faith." Butler rightly satirized those who themselves morally loose,

Prove the doctrine orthodox

By apostolic blows and knocks."

A holy life is an unanswerable argument.

4. "I have no greater joy." Next to the joy of the angels over repenting sinners is the joy of pastors over the steadfast believers. It has been well said that it requires greater pastoral effort to keep a soul converted than to get him converted. John's words imply this.

"My children." Christians, especially those under John's apostolic care while living in Ephesus.

5. "Thou doest a faithful work." He was not only a sturdy advocate of the truth, but also a strenuous Christian worker. "Here we catch just a glimpse of the evangelizing activity of the early church. Error was busy. Many deceivers had gone forth into the world. But truth was busy also."

"And strangers withal." The emphasis upon these words may be an answer to a slander uttered against Gaius, that he had neglected those who have a more pressing claim upon the common ties of Christian brotherhood.

6. "Bare witness . . . before the church." To right this wrong it seems that the church was assembled and a public testimonial to the hospitality of Gaius was made, and John was present and witnessed the cordiality of this expression of confidence and love. "It enhanced the hospitality of Gaius that the Christians whom he entertained were personally unknown to him."

"Whom thou wilt do well." A gentle hint to Gaius that there will be future opportunity for such hospitality.

"Worthily of God." In a manner worthy of God, whose servants both they and you are.

7. "For the sake of the Name." The word "Jehovah" was to the Hebrews unutterable, because of an erroneous interpretation of Lev. xxiv. 16, "He that blasphemeth the name of Jehovah shall surely be put to

death." The Jews understood this to forbid the utterance of His name, because this verb in one of its forms signifies to utter, and in another form signifies to blaspheme. The Jews have two ways of avoiding the utterance of Jehovah; one is by substituting the word Adonai, Lord; the other is to omit it entirely and say "the Name." When in the New Testament the Name designates Jesus Christ, as in Acts v. 41; James ii. 7, it is a strong argument for His Godhood, Jehovah of the Old Testament being the Jesus of the New. Hence it is the triune Name into which the Christian is baptized. It is "in essence the sum of the Christian creed." (Bishop Westcott.) The Name brings before the mind that aspect of the Divine Person which is realized by faith in each action of the spiritual life, whether "believing in the name," or "asking," or "having life."

"Taking nothing of the Gentiles." Bringing the Gospel to them prepaid, lest the preachers should be suspected as actuated by a desire to get gain. "Hence the necessity for men like Gaius to help. These missionaries declined 'to spoil the Egyptians' by taking from the heathen, and therefore would be in great difficulties if Christians did not come forward with assistance. We are not to understand that the Gentiles offered help which these brethren refused, but that the brethren never asked them for help. The Gentiles cannot well mean Gentile converts. What possible objection could there be to receiving help from them They should be early trained to support the Gospel.

8. "We therefore." The pronoun is emphatic in the Greek standing over against the pagans. This is a strong argument for generous missionary contributions. John says "we," not "you," not merely to soften the injunction, but to hint that preachers of all grades, up to the apostles themselves, should be missionary givers, in order that:

"We may be fellow-workers with the truth." Rather become their fellow-workers for the truth.

9. "I wrote somewhat unto the church." These words imply that John regarded this letter of small importance. The fact that Divine Providence has not rescued it from oblivion confirms the author's estimate. "To escape from the difficulty supposed to be involved in the loss of an apostolic letter several early authorities introduced 'would,' I would have written." (Bishop Westcott.) Thus reads the Vulgate version, the standard of the Roman Catholic Church. It is probable that Diotrephes destroyed the only copy, because of his hatred of its author and of the committee who brought it to his church.

"But Diotrephes." The presence of a man so unlovely, self-seeking and unscrupulous in the Christian church so early as the first century is indeed surprising. But more astonishing still is his treatment of the beloved John, the last living apostle, the last link between the incarnate Son of God and all subsequent generations. We are not surprised that so pure a man as John should be victim of a calumniating tongue, but we are surprised that such a poisonous tongue should hiss in the mouth of a prominent professed disciple of the meek and lowly Jesus. We do not know what official position in the church he held, whether he was a preacher or a layman. If he was an elder he must have been a ruling elder and not a teaching elder. But we have no proof that he was a presbyter or priest of the particular church in question. We are inclined to think that he was a purse-proud layman, preferring to be a Caesar in his own country village to being the second man in Rome. We are inclined to think that Gaius was the long suffering pastor of this contentious bellwether which troubled his flock and put the shepherd in constant fear. See remarks on the Third Epistle in the Introduction, [St. John's Literary Activity]. The presence of such a headstrong man in any local church, tyrannizing the members and terrifying the pastor, reconciles the writer to a well-guarded episcopacy to afford protection to young and inexperienced pastors as well as counsel and strength to feeble churches.

"Loveth . . . preëminence." In creed he seems to be orthodox, but in ambition he is Satanic.

"Receiveth us not." His non-reception of John ("us" here means "me") is the rejection of his authority. He wishes his church to be independent of all supervision. He must rule alone, "the monarch of all he surveys."

10. "Prating against us." Accusing me falsely with malicious words. The literal Greek is "throwing up bubbles," indulging in charges as hollow and as unsubstantial as soap bubbles. One sin begets others. This man's vaulting ambition and abnormal self-assertion inspire slander and lying, and finally injustice by the wrongful exclusion of innocent persons from the church.

"Casteth out of the church." Probably under the forms of ecclesiastical procedure, as Christ was condemned, or they may have been frozen out by unbrotherly and cold treatment. "It is difficult to realize the circumstances of the case. It may perhaps be reasonably conjectured that Diotrephes regarded the reception of the brethren as an invasion of his authority." (Bishop Westcott.)

11. "Beloved." This sweet word, after this list of words harsh and bitter, reminds us of the couplet of the American poet:

And silence like a poultice comes

To heal the blows of sound."

"Imitate not evil." A much needed prohibition, for men are very prone to imitate a career of successful villainy.

"He that doeth good is of God." His right conduct comes from the reception of the grace of God by faith, and from obedience to His will. It was a maxim of the saintly John Fletcher, "All our goodness is of God, all our evil is of ourselves," because we choose to retain it rather than its proffered cure by Christ the great Physician. Bishop Westcott suggests that John is warning against the Gnostics who disparaged holiness as not necessary to those who have a deeper insight into truth, that is, to the intellectually illuminated, such as they proudly professed to be, asserting that they had no need of the atonement made by Jesus Christ. See note on 1 John i. 8.

12. "Demetrius hath good report." In contrast with the abhorred behavior of the ecclesiastical "boss" (pardon the political term), just described, is the commendable example of Demetrius whose conduct is to be imitated. He has a threefold testimonial to his moral uprightness and Christian excellence: (1) The favorable impression he has made upon the public; (2) truth herself commended him as realizing her ideal of Christian character. Possibly this refers the public impression to the agency of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth; and (3) the testimony of St. John and his intimates. We have no further knowledge of Demetrius. That he is the silversmith who led the mob in Ephesus against Paul, but now, like Paul, advocating the faith which he once destroyed, is a mere conjecture. "It is likely from the context that Demetrius was the bearer of this letter." (Bishop Westcott.)

"Thou knowest" -- singular instead of the plural is the best authenticated. The change to the plural was probably made in some manuscripts to suit the erroneous idea that this is not a private but a general Epistle.

13. This conclusion closely resembles that of the Second Epistle. This suggests that they were both written at about the same time.

14. "Peace be with thee." The triune blessing full of gospel meaning.

Internal peace of conscience,

Fraternal peace of friendship,

Supernal peace of glory.

"By name." As Jesus the good Shepherd calleth His own sheep by name.

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