

Jeopardy to the Church Where Folk Chase Status

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[0 : 00] Good, well we're going to turn to our Bible readings and Josh is returning this morning to 3 John. So do turn to 3 John in your Bibles and we'll read this short letter together this morning.

So it's right at the end, just before Revelation and Jude, and we'll read the third letter of John. The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health as it goes well with your soul. For I rejoice greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth.

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testify to your love before the church.

You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.

[1 : 19] Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.

So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

Beloved, do not imitate evil, but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God. Whoever does evil has not seen God.

Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true. I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink.

I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them.

[2 : 38] Amen. Well, may the Lord bless his word to us this morning. Well, good morning. Do open your Bibles again to 3 John.

We looked last week at the first half, so we'll be looking at verse 9 following this morning. What impresses you about a person?

What is it about someone that allows them influence over you? How do we know we're putting our confidence in the right source of leaders?

Key questions. And like with most things, the way of the world and the way of the church will be, or at least ought to be, different. You see, in the church, the way up is the way down.

And in 3 John, we have a bit of a dangerous church member sandwich. And the member at the heart of the sandwich is an example of all that a leader in a church cannot be.

[3 : 46] Two mighty fine pieces of bread either side, Gaius and Demetrius. But in the middle, the dangerous, dastardly, Diotrephes. Last week, we focused on Gaius, who engaged in genuine hospitality for those who shared in gospel work.

Giving him support, encouragement, a platform to minister. He embodied real faith by his visible love for other Christians. Keen to encourage and support and invest in those doing real ministry. And that is truly the way to joy in this life. Look back at verse 4. The place of joy, greatest joy, is walking in the truth by walking in love for the brothers.

And seeing other people do likewise. And so there are lots of encouragements that John provides Gaius in order to press on with that. But the reason he needed to encourage Gaius to do that was because of the specter of Diotrephes lurking over the church.

John didn't want the toxic pattern of Diotrophes to spread or to hinder real gospel fellowship. So having looked at Gaius last week, we're going to look this morning at the other two characters in this letter.

[5 : 04] Diotrophes, truth endangered, verses 9 to 11. And Demetrius, truth embodied, verses 11 following. So first, truth endangered, verses 9 to 11.

When a leader or a member sees the church as a platform upon which to build their own castle, their own kingdom, their own brand, that is a dangerous thing for the church and deadly for their souls.

Look at verse 9. John has already written something to the church, but it hasn't been heeded. Now, it seems unlikely that what's already been written refers to 2 John.

Some people speculate as to that. And there are some similarities between the letters, but the particular issues are quite different. 2 John is all about a poisonous progressive gospel, and it's all about false teaching that will destroy the church.

But 3 John makes no mention of such teaching. In fact, for all of Diotrophes' many dangers, one thing that can't really be leveled at him from the letter is that he was clearly teaching a false gospel.

[6 : 13] But as it is, Diotrophes' danger doesn't come from his doctrine. Remember, even demons have kind of perfect doctrine.

But what do they do with it? Diotrophes' danger was that he displays a desire for domination. And we see that in four ways. First, verse 9, he wants to be first.

First, John's previous letter seems to have been sidelined and ignored by Diotrophes. And look at the damning description of him. Diotrophes, who likes to put himself first.

And that's really the traits, the vice that overarches all the other things that will follow. In desiring to be first, Diotrophes carries out all kinds of evil.

But the baseline desire is that he wants to be first. Now, it's not really clear to us what position, if any, Diotrophes had in the church.

[7 : 17] Some speculate that at the point where the apostles were passing away, he was an example of a kind of bishop who had authority over the churches. And maybe he did have a formal official office like that.

We can't be certain. He may just have been an influential church member who, by personality and personal influence over others, wielded power. But whatever it is, it doesn't really matter.

Because what we see is someone who is driven by building and protecting their own position of power and influence in the church. And that can be done from the pulpit or the pew.

Now, sadly, we don't have to look too far for cases of leadership going wrong. And that is sadly true in the church too, isn't it?

How often do we hear of teals of well-known Christian leaders being exposed as failing in terrible ways? Where the lid comes off and behind the sheen of success, someone's been engaged in building their own kingdom.

[8 : 20] Not the kingdom of the Lord Jesus. You don't need to look far to find podcasts, books, blogs, articles, and this kind of thing. And when there's a buzz around that, it's all the more important that we be clear about the difference between leadership that actually leads and is effective in bearing fruit in good, godly ways, and leadership that is all about using people to get what you want.

To build up none other than oneself. Well, diotrophies is the latter. The only beneficiary of his power and influence is himself. Now, John's answer, as we'll see, isn't to remove any sense of authority from the church.

Quite the opposite, as the rest of verse 9 shows. John instead gives us a means of diagnosing the kind of people to follow and imitate. Those who ought to be entrusted with authority and influence.

Those who shouldn't be. Look at verse 11. He says, beloved, do not imitate evil, but imitate good. And what we have here is a, not this, not verses 9 to 10, diotrophies, but this. Verse 12. Demetrius.

It's a diagnostic.

[9 : 37] Not this, but this. You see, the truth is that someone can be the most gifted Bible teacher you've ever heard. They can be the most experienced pianist.

They can have a vast ability to manage and organize programs and ministries in a church. They can be the greatest children's pastor you've ever seen. And still be unfit to take a lead in the church.

Character and conviction always trumps competency in Christ's church. If someone is happy to trample people and climb on their backs to see their own flame burn brightest, then no matter the greatness of their gifts, in the end, all they'll do is cause more harm than good.

The Bible has a rich history of people trying to reach up for their own benefit and forsaking God in the process. And it never ends well, does it? Think back to the garden.

The serpents to the women. Eat of the fruits and you will be like God. Think about the people of Bebel. Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves.

[10:57] Or think of the religious leaders of Jesus' day who lorded it over people, taking the best seats in the synagogue, the place of honor at feasts and all the rest.

Well, Jesus said, they will receive the greater condemnation. Beware those who want to be first, who must get things their way at all costs.

Beware those who can't handle being challenged. Beware those who make decisions and do things that generally bring adulation and avoid opprobrium.

Beware those who always want to take credit and be the bearer of all the good news. Beware those who aren't ever prepared to take a stand that will personally cost them.

Diotrephes wanted to be first. And all the rest of these behaviors flew from this desire. He wanted to be first, but second, he feels to accept right spiritual authority.

[12:00] Verse 9 again. Diotrephes does not acknowledge our authority. You see, John doesn't decry authority.

Actually, it's a problem that John's authority is being ignored. We live in a time when authority is something of a dirty word. Self-expression, self-actualization.

Self is king. People want autonomy. I'm the king of my life. I can do whatever I want. But the world and the church are at odds in that.

There must be authority for a Christian. And of course, authority can be misused and cause great harm. So it can't be wielded lightly or flippantly. But it's been observed that the central ethic of Paul's letters of the bulk of the New Testament can be boiled down to submission and self-control. Christian freedom is not anarchy. Christian freedom is living under good and righteous rule that helps us flourish eternally. Every Christian is in submission.

[13:06] Submission to Jesus as king. But on top of that, submission comes in other forms for the Christian. For a start, submitting to Jesus as king means submitting to his word.

We don't have free reign to do whatever we want to do. Well, Diotrephes was rejecting that. He wasn't submitting himself to the apostles. Those with a unique authority passed to them from Jesus himself at the birth of the church.

Diotrephes wasn't interested. Submitting to John would mean not being first. It would mean his position, his castle, his kingdom would be subjugated and diminished.

That's a holy worldly attitude, isn't it? Well, of course, the age of the apostles has passed. But we do still have the apostolic word, the Bible, the scriptures.

And it is the ultimate authority for any Christian. So if you hear any person placing their agenda, their ideas, their way, either side by side with the scriptures or above them, then that is alarm bells.

[14:16] But even though we do not have the apostles, we have their words, and we also have a right sense of order in church. Everyone is under authority, or should be.

But even in that, no person's authority can ever contravene or contradict the apostolic word. So in our church, all our members place themselves in submission to the leaders, those who keep watch over their souls, as Hebrews tells us.

And the ministers, we're under authority too. We're under the authority of a presbytery, of other ministers who can hold us to account. And when we serve on teams, there are team leaders who we submit ourselves to.

It's just a natural course of the Christian life. So it's a worrying sign if someone wants to operate outside of any kind of accountability or authority.

It's worrying when someone refuses to submit themselves to other believers and membership in a church. Instead, choosing to want to float around without anyone able to challenge them.

[15:23] That is a worrying sign. Worrying for the individual. But it's a wholly other thing to want to conduct a ministry like that.

That's a dangerous thing. It's dangerous to want to conduct a ministry without any kind of accountability from a church or from church leaders. Because it's dangerous for others. So we must beware those who scorn feedback. Who don't listen to constructive criticism. Beware those who think that nobody else can ever possibly, helpfully contribute to doing things more faithfully or fruitfully.

Beware those who seek to recruit you to their own little exclusive ministry or Bible study outside the auspices of a church. Beware those who want authority but not accountability.

Diotrephes feel to accept right spiritual authority. Well, third, he was also spreading falsehood. Verse 10, he was spreading falsehood.

[16:32] John says, if I come, I will bring up what Diotrephes is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. John indicates the possibility of coming to visit this church.

And we see that again in verse 14. I hope to see you soon. And he hopes to challenge Diotrephes. And he seeks to do it face to face.

It's not the only time we read of someone with this kind of authority writing and saying, I'm going to come and visit to sort things out. Paul spoke likewise to the Corinthians. We've seen that not long ago in 1 Corinthians 4.

When those with influence veer off track, it is right that they have a course correction. Paul warned the Corinthians that he was coming and adds that he could either come with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness.

But he's coming. When a firm word is required, the apostolic pattern is that our issues are best resolved face to face. It's easy for us to send off an angry email, isn't it?

[17:40] Quickly fired off, but rarely done in love. One of the speakers at our ministry conference that we host each summer offered some very helpful pastoral wisdom on this.

If you have something hard or critical to say to someone, do it in person. Look them in the eyes and do it lovingly. If you've got something positive or encouraging to do and say, do it in writing.

Written words are read and re-read and mulled over and thought about again and again. Make them encouraging ones. When a firm word needs to be said, look someone in the eyes and do so lovingly.

Well, I think John would agree with that. John is planning to come to this church to tackle diatribes and his behavior. His desire to be first is at odds with the apostles.

And it's led to him spreading wicked nonsense against them. Gossip and slander are afoot. And that's a problem needing to be solved face to face.

[18:47] And it follows, don't it? If you're determined to preserve your position, then that means sidelining those who might be a danger to it. Raise yourself up by pushing others down.

And words can do great damage to others, can't they? It doesn't have to start with all out lies, but just lingering to jump on top of any hint or possibility of a wrongdoing. Gotcha! I'm going to nail you for this.

Or delighting to tell the others, can you believe what that person said to me? Whilst leaving out of the story that we've done everything in our power to provoke it. Or taking someone else's weakness, which they've told you about, and punishing them for it.

No grace shown. Instead, treating them as if any of us are without such weakness. And the truth is, when we're out to get people, when we see people as rivals for our position, it's easy to find ways to discredit them, isn't it?

Milking any shred of imperfection. Always pleased to retell a story, regardless of context, that shows just how unfit they are. Never granting anyone the benefit of the doubt.

[20:02] Always jumping to and helping others to jump to their worst possible conclusion. And just generally showing new Christian charity to get the full story. Well, these things are a slippery path to all out slander.

Beware those who delight to point out the shortcomings of others. It's always worth pondering why someone's telling you about the indiscretions of another.

Diotrephes was spreading falsehood to protect his position. And four. He flatly refuses to show hospitality to the brothers.

Verse 10. Not content with spreading wicked nonsense, he refuses to welcome the brothers. And he also stops those who want to.

Welcome in 3 John, as we've seen as likely directed towards visiting preachers, putting them up, and so supporting them and offering them influence in the local church.

[21 : 06] And Diotrephes doesn't want that to happen. Even though one of the repeated characteristics of leaders in the church is hospitality, Diotrephes isn't interested. He doesn't see brothers as brothers.

Upon seeing and hearing of other gospel workers, his heart isn't warmed, it's hardened. They aren't brothers, they're rivals. And so offer them no platform, no opportunity, no support, no encouragement, in case they're appreciated in his stead.

That's not wholly alien to us, is it? When we're involved in something and have done it for a while, and suddenly someone else comes along who's as gifted as we are, perhaps more gifted, and what we want to do is stop them.

Stop them from being able to show that. So we don't share our pulpit, our piano, or we don't let someone else lead a Bible study in my growth group, or we don't want them to start a catering team in case it outstrips mine, or whatever it is.

Because what we really fear is that I'll no longer be appreciated. In the same way, I'll lose my little place. I'll no longer be first. That is such a bitter root for a church, for a ministry, for a Christian, preventing others excelling because of what it might mean for me in my position.

[22 : 37] When we're wholly given to protecting our own position, then the lengths that need to be gone to only get bigger and bigger. Diotrephes doesn't just flatly refuse to show hospitality to the brothers, he frustrates others' attempts to show it.

But the poison spreads. And when our position in this world and this church is of the utmost importance to us, it is like a poison to our souls.

And look at what it can lead to, verse 10. The very last phrase. Diotrephes gets to the point of putting them out of the church. He doesn't just sideline those who are a threat to his position.

He gets rid of those who might even be supportive of those who might threaten his position. He would get rid of people like Gaius. What a contrast to John's words in verse 4.

John rejoices. Nothing brings him more joy than seeing other believers flourish. Diotrephes does what he can to stop others thriving in case it diminishes his position.

[23 : 38] He chooses jealousy over joy. Beware those who must always take center stage and won't share it.

Beware those who aren't willing to train, encourage, and support others to minister and to step up. Diotrephes flatly refused to show support to other gospel workers.

He wanted to be first and much evil followed. But before we go Diotrephes hunting to search out people who want to be first in our midst, we need to be aware that Diotrephes, the Diotrephes in each of us, needs to die.

Diotrephes, that's a New Year's resolution to stick to, isn't it? The truth is, I wince saying some of these things because I recognize the ugliness of them in my desires.

But the battle for each of us to overcome this must never stop. Whatever our role in church, it can be so tempting to stamp our feet and decide that we will do what we can to get things our way.

[24 : 47] I don't like how creche is being run or how we do welcome, whether I'm told what my growth group should study. Many other things besides. So I'm going to wield my little crown and get things my way.

I don't like it that my role or my position is diminished by changes. I don't like that other people are asked to step up and I'm not. And so with the most pious of smiles, I'm going to be obstinate.

I'm going to do what I can to protect the status and position that I have. And I'm going to do it whilst claiming a spiritual aspect to it. If we're all honest, we all like to get our own way, don't we?

I know I do. And it's easy for our pride to bite when that doesn't happen. But look at John's words. Those who are given wholly to that, those who won't fight it, those who stop battling against the desire that they will be first.

Verse 11, they prove that they have not seen God. The Lord Jesus sets the example, in his kingdom, the way up is the way down.

[26 : 00] For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many. If we really crave being first, getting our way, claiming credit, then John says, we have not seen or met God.

How could we have? How could we really belong to the King who gave up the adoration of heaven for the agony of the cross? How could we cling to our own importance whilst claiming to belong to the one who came not to be served, but to serve?

Well, that's a chastening word from John. John, where the spirit of Diotrephes runs wild, truth is endangered.

But John leaves us with another figure, Demetrius, and in him we see truth embodied, verse 11 following. Truth embodied.

Take care what impresses you. Take care who impresses you. Now, verse 11 acts like a hinge between these two characters.

[27 : 13] It's made up of two sentences that both have a positive and a negative. And each positive in verse 11 points to Demetrius and each negative to Diotrephes. So verse 11, beloved, that's Gaius, do not imitate evil, that's Diotrephes, but imitate good, Demetrius.

Whoever does good, Demetrius, is from God. Whoever does evil, Diotrephes, has not seen God.

It's so often the case in church life that divisions and factions form around people.

Whether it be ministers, elders, group leaders, team leaders, whatever it is. Sometimes even just a family. And in such situations, it can be ever so easy to let personality win the day.

To get behind the one for whom charisma shines through the most. That's certainly true in the world. When there's a divide, when there's uncertainty and a path needs to be picked, we look at who else is on the path.

We look at things and think, whose team do I want to be on? And usually we want to be on the team that boasts the greatest gifts, the greatest experience, the greatest status.

[28 : 28] But that is not the marker in the church, is it? How do we avoid being suckered in by someone such as Diotrephes? We must take care with what impresses us.

Authority in the church comes from nowhere. Not a title or from a demand for allegiance or from fear. If it comes from these things, that's not what we need, is it?

The people of God have always been taught to see things differently. Character trumps competency. Godliness ranks above giftedness. A trail of destruction, no matter how small, is much more telling than book seals or YouTube views.

And as we saw last week, the church is the arena in which faith is seen. And that's so important, isn't it? John points to Demetrius as an example for us.

Demetrius is likely the person that's delivering the letter. So he would be in front of Gaius in the flesh, seen. And John can hold Demetrius up as an example because three things show that he was the real deal.

[29 : 43] Three things that we should pay attention to above all gifts and anything else. The first, the regard of those who knew them.

Verse 12, Demetrius had received a good testimony from everyone. The Christian life is a life lived. Our faith is lived out day to day in front of those who knew us. We can't hide it. And so we also can't hide for long what we're like if people really do know us.

When the pressure is on, does a temper flare? Do they lash out? When away from glaring eyes, is there a holy other side to someone? Do they have a real interest in people?

Are they quick to forgive or slow to be gracious? Do they hold their hands up when they get things wrong? Do they know what it's like to ask for forgiveness? Is there a measure of sketchiness in how they conduct themselves?

[30 : 48] Is their word trustworthy? Or are promises and commitments made in haste and without any intent to deliver? It ought to be a concern if someone in authority and leadership isn't well known by anyone.

It at least prompts the question, why is that the case? Where are those who can vouch for them?

Where are those who say, this man is above reproach? It is a reassuring thing to have plenty of people able to testify to the quality of a person's character and to their integrity.

It's a general consensus that this person is above reproach. But we have more than just the word of others to go on, more than just the regard of those who know them. Secondly, John points us to their resemblance of their lives to the scripture.

Again, verse 12, Demetrius receives a good testimony from the truth itself. The life of faith pictured for us throughout the scriptures is like a mirror.

It shows us the reality of what we're like. And some people hate looking in the mirror. But here, Demetrius' life fits the life of faith.

[32 : 03] The pattern of God's people in scriptures is embodied in him. So much so that you could say any explanation of godliness it might find in the scriptures is the description of the kind of man Demetrius was.

The truth itself testifies about him. The kind of people to imitate, to trust, to follow, to hold influence are those who are impressive in godliness.

When we look at the scriptures and look at them, do they match up? It's easy to be wooed by charisma, but it's character that really impresses.

A leader doesn't need to be perfect, there's no such thing. But a righteous life in the Bible isn't a perfect one. It's a faithful one. One that seeks to honour God and one that walks in repentance.

So, is the mirror of scripture more akin to someone observing themselves and feeling that, I'm feeling pretty slim today, I like the look of that. Or is it like the mirror, those funny mirrors you find in places that distort massive heads and tiny little bodies?

[33 : 18] When looking at scripture and looking at a person, is it a pretty picture or a terrifying one with huge heads and tiny bodies? John points us to the regard of others and the resemblance of their lives to scripture, but finally, also the recommendation of those in authority over them.

Verse 12 again, John says, we also add our testimony. Demetrius comes with the recommendation of the apostles. Listen to the ones you know are trustworthy.

Is he one of them? Are other known gospel workers, are other ministers prepared to vouch for him? Is he a true brother? Is he engaged in the same work?

Or is it just a facade? You see what John says? It isn't just that we add our testimony, he qualifies it. You know that we are trustworthy, you know that our testimony is true.

This isn't a license for leaders to have a boys club. His face doesn't really fit, he's not for us, he didn't study at the right kind of place. No, it's John saying that those who are known and proven, those who receive a good testimony from everyone and from the truth itself, are able to say, yes, he's like us, he's one of us, a faithful brother.

[34 : 45] In many ways, that's what ordination is, it's recognizing the person has proven that other ministers or leaders are prepared to stand with and behind them. But the recommendation doesn't have to be in these formal ways, it's really a question of, does this person have the trust of faithful church leaders?

leaders? These three things will help guard a church, will help guard Christians from being impressed by the wrong kind of people.

Are they regarded by others? Do they resemble the righteousness of the Bible? Do they have the recommendation of other proven faithful leaders? leaders? We must take care of what impresses us.

The spirit of Diotrephes lives on, and it is of immense danger to the church. John says jeopardy to the church where folk chase status.

But, those who are proven faithful, verse 11, they come to us from God, the true head of any church.

[35 : 56] Let's pray. Father, we thank you that the Lord Jesus is the perfect king, the one of whom it is written that though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, and suffered all manner of humiliation to seek and serve and see of his people.

And so, Lord, we ask your help. Help us embrace this pattern, and so be protected from the lingering desire for self that is in each of us, and that truly we'd be a church marked with joy in seeing others flourish, and not jealousy that poisons us.

and we ask these things for the better prospering of your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.