

Pride and partnership

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together. Our gracious God and our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you that we all are one in mission, that we all are one in call.

We thank you for our weekly fellowship together. We thank you that because of your Son, we may say, whatever the circumstances, that it is well with our souls, and that we have much cause for rejoicing in him, as we walk with him, and see each other walking in the truth.

Father, as we gather today, we think of those who have gone out for the sake of your name. We think of those who first spoke of Christ to us. We think of those who encouraged us when we were discouraged.

We think of those who helped us to grow by their example. And Lord, we ask that as a people, we will support such as those, that we may in our different times and our different ways be fellow laborers for the truth.

And as we serve you, Lord, we ask that you will keep our hearts humble. Help us to remember that in your kingdom, the first are last and the last are first. That true greatness is demonstrated through service.

[1 : 20] Lord, we ask you to help us to imitate what is good, and not what is evil. And so at this time, we pray for our nation, as we are given a glimpse of the sin and lawlessness and anarchy, destroying the peace of cities in this land.

We are reminded, Lord, of those words that Paul wrote in Romans, of people who are swift to shed blood, in whose paths are ruin and misery, of those who have not known the way of peace, for there is no fear of God before their eyes.

But we are conscious, Lord, that we are simply reaping what has been sown in the hearts and minds of young people who are taught in our increasingly secular nation that there is no God, that there is no gospel, that there is no redemption.

So, Father, we pray that many will remember their Creator in the days of their youth, and that like Paul before them, many who are now insolent blasphemers might come to know and understand the love of Christ, who died for sinners.

And we ask that many will be made new creatures in Him, and that righteousness might once more exalt this nation. So we commit ourselves and our country into your care in Jesus' name.

[2 : 44] Amen. Well, last week we began to look at 2 John, which is on page 1025 of the Church Bibles.

This week I invite you to turn over the page to 1026 and 3 John. We saw last week that 2 John consisted of an exhortation and a warning.

John was exhorting the disciples to continue walking, to walk in love for one another, to walk in the truth of the gospel, particularly the truth about the deity of Christ, and to walk in obedience to His commands.

The Christian life was a three-fold walk, and the preaching of the truth of the gospel led to Christian love, genuine Christian love. But it was also a warning, and John warned his readers about accepting into their homes and into their churches false teachers, people who were denying the deity of Christ.

And the reason was, of course, if the gospel was lost, if the truth was watered down, then there would be no Christian love resulting from it. So he said, do not welcome these people into your homes and your churches.

[4 : 08] And as we turn to 3 John, we see the same pattern. It begins with an exhortation, this time telling us who to welcome into our homes and our churches.

And then there is a warning, this time against pride in Christian leaders. So I want to study this little letter with you today.

We'll break it up into four short sections, but I'll begin just by reading. 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 rejoiced 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.

[5 : 17] 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. 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 speak to you soon, and we will talk face to face.

Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them. Amen. Well, as John writes to Gaius, the first thing we notice about his letter is that he finds encouragement in the face of discouragement, verses 2 to 4.

[6 : 51] I have no greater joy, he says, than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. Some years ago, we did a mission to Albania, and I think I mentioned that a couple of weeks back, but at the end of the mission, there was one chap who was utterly disinterested in the gospel throughout the entire week, and on the very last day, we were having a kind of feedback time, and one of the leaders said, would anyone like to share what they've learned this week?

And this chap, who'd show no interest whatsoever, stood up and professed faith, and I was quite blown away by it, and he said, I wasn't interested, but the Lord has spoken to me this week, and I want to become a Christian, and I was quite amazed, I was even more amazed, in fact, because his name was Renato, and he explained to me that Renato could be translated reborn, born again, for a very fitting end to that week.

But a few years later, I was visiting a friend in England who'd been with me, and he'd been back to Albania, and he said, I've got a video of some of the highlights of this camp, and he'd just done another one, and he put the video on, and on it, I saw some of the younger Christians who'd been there leading the camp, and among them, Renato, leading the camp, sharing the gospel with his friends and with his colleagues, and I was so happy.

Verse 4, I have no greater joy, says John, than to hear that my children are walking in the truth, to see and hear that Christians are going on with the Lord, even when separated by distance.

John begins on a note of encouragement, and yet, there was cause for him to be discouraged. In 2 John, we met false teachers, going around destroying churches, and in 3 John, we meet a proud teacher, trying to control a church, and in the middle of that, John focuses upon the encouragement.

[8 : 55] So there's an encouragement for us. It's quite easy to hang our heads, to shake our heads, to get depressed when we come together, to speak of the gross ignorance of the gospel in this country, especially among young people, to speak of denominational failure nationally, and to get so bogged down with all the discouragements, that we forget to be encouraged, that people are walking with the truth, that people are coming to new birth.

And John reminds us to rejoice in all circumstances. There's a proverb, I think it's an African one, you can wait for the storm to pass, or you can dance in the rain.

Seems a fitting proverb today, doesn't it? And I think the point is, even in the middle of hardship, there is still cause for rejoicing with the Lord. So let's dance in the rain.

Secondly, John encourages his readers into fellowship in the truth. He does that in several ways. He's referring, you remember, to these traveling teachers.

In the first century, preachers would move around the empire, they would go from church to church, they would stay with families, they would be very itinerant. And he says, we ought to support people like this.

[10 : 11] Verse 5, it is a faithful thing you do, in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are. I think the suggestion here is that Gaius would welcome people into his home, he would allow them to stay with him, he would feed them, perhaps clothe them, cover their expenses.

He would extend Christian hospitality to them, even though they were strangers. Some weeks ago we had a choir from America come to the church, 52 of them, and I was very touched by the hospitality that was shown through this church.

Students were taken to different families, they had lovely times together, and it was a real expression of 3 John chapter 5, a faithful thing. Tomorrow, in fact, myself and Terry are flying off to Slovakia, and we have no idea who we're staying with.

We've been told there's a family waiting for us, but we don't know who they are. So, it still happens, it seems, in itinerant church ministry.

Verse 5, hospitality. Verse 6, you will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. Perhaps John is saying here, you are to give them some new shoes, you are to give them some money, perhaps to pay their travel to the next city, you are to support them financially.

[11 : 34] Verse 8, he says, we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. John is saying these people have taken a bold step of faith, they've made a sacrifice, they've left jobs, they've left their home, they may have left family members, they face danger, they face hardship, all in Christ's name.

And the church, therefore, has a responsibility to support them. Verse 7, he says, they have accepted nothing from the Gentiles. In the ancient world, I gather, people would travel around preaching or speaking or performing for money.

And there is a danger that Christians would do the same, they would be like buskers, they'd preach, and then they'd ask the people they'd evangelize for some money. That's what the Hare Krishnas do on Buchanan Street.

I hope you have a chance to share with them from time to time, but once they've shared with you, they often ask for some groceries. In a sense, they expect the people they're evangelizing to support them.

And John says, that isn't right for the Christian. We are to accept nothing from the Gentiles. The church will support her own workers, her own missionaries, her own evangelists.

[12 : 52] It is the responsibility of the church. And that sounds a little bit down to earth, doesn't it? You see, we hear stories of people like Hudson Taylor and George Muller and these great heroes of the faith and men of prayer who would just trust the Lord for everything.

And our lives would be punctuated by miraculous episodes for which we give thanks. And sometimes, of course, there is supernatural provision. But for the most part, it does seem that the needs of God's people are met by other people.

So you had Elijah, fed by ravens for three years, those most selfish birds. And his successor, Elisha, no ravens for him.

Instead, there is a wealthy lady who builds him a small room and cooks him meals from time to time. You have the apostles. Jesus could feed 5,000 people with a few loaves and fish.

And yet, at the same time, the needs of the apostolic band were met by a few ladies. who provided for them out of their means. The apostle Paul took a job to pay for his expenses.

[14 : 03] And John is saying, it all seems a little bit down to earth, doesn't it? But that's the normal pattern. That the body cares for itself and the church cares for those who go out for the sake of the name.

And it's so crucial, verse 8, we ought to support people like these that we may be fellow workers for the truth. I'm not a big Formula One fan.

Helen is. We were staying in Manchester and we ended up watching the preparations for the Hungarian Grand Prix. And what struck me was, I would recognize some of the names, Lewis Hamilton or Michael Schumacher, but the number of people it takes to actually get them on the track is enormous.

Before the Grand Prix, they put up these big sheds and they have teams of engineers, teams of scientists, teams of mechanics, just to get them on the road. Everyone knows the name of Lewis Hamilton.

Perhaps not everyone knows the name of the guy who pumps up his tyres. And yet if it wasn't for him, there'd be no Grand Prix. There'd be no Lewis Hamilton, there'd be no podium. And what John is saying here is that we are all, whatever our calling, fellow workers for the truth.

[15 : 17] Some people are goers, some people went out for the sake of the name, some fly off to different countries. But goers need senders, people who recognise them and commission them.

Goers need givers, people to support them financially. Goers need encouragers, people to phone them, to write to them. And above all, goers need prayer partners, most importantly of all, people to pray for them, faithfully.

So John says we are all fellow workers. There is no sort of hierarchy. We are all together in the truth. All are one in call, are varied gifts united by Christ, the Lord of all.

And he writes that because there is always a danger, and that is the peril of pride. verse 9, we have this man Diotrephes, and he sounds like quite a public figure in the church, but he likes to put himself first.

He likes to be up front. He likes the sound of his own voice. And John has some strong words to write about him. Verse 9, it seems he does not acknowledge the apostolic authority.

[16 : 38] Verse 10, he speaks against them, talking wicked nonsense against us. And very seriously, unlike Gaius, he refuses to welcome the brothers.

He doesn't want anyone else teaching his church, he doesn't want anyone else speaking in his pulpit, he doesn't want anyone else contradicting what he has to say. So serious is it, he also stops those who want to, and puts them out of the church.

This man, Diotrephes, was in the process of changing the church into a cult. Of controlling everything, of controlling the people, of controlling what the people heard.

That's a characteristic of cults, is that they seek to control you, who you can spend time with, what you can listen to, what you can read. And that's exactly what Diotrephes was doing.

He was exalting himself in the church. And there's such a contrast with verse 7, isn't there? Because these men were told the faithful brothers went out for the sake of the name.

[17 : 47] Diotrephes wasn't particularly interested in the name of Jesus. Like the men of Babel before him, he was making a name for himself. He loved to put himself first.

And it's fitting, isn't it, that his name has been recorded for all eternity, but in such a negative light. Not concerned with the name of Christ, but concerned with his own name.

Instead of building the kingdom, he sought to build a little empire for himself in that local fellowship. Far better to be one of the brothers in verse 7, whose names are written in heaven.

So, John identifies something which is always a danger and always a difficulty for people, Christians in whatever our sphere of service.

Jesus spoke into the Pharisees who loved the place of honour at feasts and their best seats in the synagogue and greetings in the marketplace. They loved the praise of men.

[18 : 51] They loved to exalt themselves in the company of men. Paul warned of this danger in writing to Timothy. He said, when you're appointing elders, make sure he's not a recent convert or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

Pride. Well, Diotrephes had tumbled headlong into pride. He sought to make a name for himself and to control the church.

And John warns against that. But the second problem is that Diotrephes is behaving just like a pagan. In verse 7, the faithful brothers accepted nothing from the pagans, nothing from the Gentiles.

They lived quite differently and distinctively from them. And yet Diotrephes is behaving exactly like a pagan leader. It does seem the natural inclination of man is to seek our own interests, to seek preeminence, in our own field, to brag and boast about who we are, what we've done, what we have.

I remember when I graduated from medical school, I was given a book called How to Succeed as a Doctor. And it was a series of interviews of people who had all become very successful.

[20 : 16] They had successful careers, successful research, successful families, skiing holidays three times a year, two houses in France, this kind of thing, all just bragging about how successful they'd been.

But that's the world's way of thinking. You make a name for yourself, you acquire possessions for yourself, and you get a reputation. But it's not the world's way of thinking.

When his disciples were showing the first seeds of pride, Jesus called them to him in Mark chapter 10. And he said to them, you know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles, same word, of the pagans, lorded over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.

But it shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first, Tiochus is long to be first, didn't he?

Whoever would be first among you must be your slave and the slave of all. for even the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[21 : 27] Diotrephes exalted himself, and yet God would humble him. Seeking to be first, he became last. Seeking to make a name for himself, his name was written in scripture as a sorry example of human pride.

It's always a danger, isn't it? I got invited to say speaking of Christian Union breakfast some years ago on service, and I prepared a little Bible study on service, but I got there early, and as I was waiting, I got talking to a man in the street, and he invited me into the little church across the road, and he explained that he showed me round and said that since he retired, he comes to that church, I think, three or four times a week, and just cleans the whole thing, all by himself.

And I said to the students, I think that man should be speaking to you about service, not me. The first will be last, and the last will be first. And finally, John says, therefore, choose your role models wisely, verse 11.

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.

Diotrephes, for all his pride, was probably a handsome man, probably an able man, probably a charming man, maybe he wore a nice suit, had a nice watch, drove a nice car, we don't know.

[22 : 57] But it is tempting, or it may have been tempting for some of these people to idolize him, to say, I want to be like Diotrephes, that great leader. And John says, no, do not imitate evil, but imitate good.

And he gives the example of Demetrius. We don't know, I think, anything about Demetrius. But it's clear that he has received a good testimony from everyone, well spoken of, probably for his humility, probably for his service.

And he says, if you want someone to follow, not Diotrephes, but Demetrius, make him your example, imitate his conduct. Well, John had much to write, but he left his letter there.

Twice he gives us warnings, and twice he exhorts us. He reminds us to continue walking in truth and love, that the truth of the gospel is absolutely essential to Christian love.

Without that, we will not have any Christian love. And he says, be very firm with false teachers, don't welcome them, have nothing to do with them. But we ought to welcome and support those who have gone out for the sake of the name, to proclaim the truth.

[24 : 10] faith. We ought to support them in any way we can, to show practical Christian love. But as we do so, we must be on our watch for pride, in ourselves, in our own hearts, and in those in leadership.

Two short letters, two small letters, but with some very great themes. So we thank God for them. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your son, for that he came to, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom.

And Lord, we pray that in everything we do, we might follow his example, seeking to humble ourselves before you, seeking to walk in the truth of his gospel, and seeking to grow and increase in love for him.

So we thank you for our time together. We pray that you will encourage us, and help us to encourage and support one another. In Jesus' name, Amen.