

The Devil in Diotrephes

Postcards from John, Part 12

3 John 9-10

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Pride is a common sin that infects fallen mankind. And the redeemed are not immune. Through Apostle John's letter, God uses Diotrephes as an example of what to watch out for, both in others and ourselves. Believers need to be aware of this insidious sin that can intimidate and discourage the body of Christ. We are called to be wise and humble servants, not seekers of status and power.

Discussion Points:

Solomon wrote, "***If you rebuke a scoffer, he will hate you – but if you rebuke a wise man, he will love you!***" (Proverbs 9:8). Diotrephes was one who fit into the first category of people, and acts as a warning to churches everywhere.

- What does the Bible teach about pride and its effects?
- Why is it a dangerous mindset to believe that you have nothing left to learn or be taught?
- How can a disgraceful mouth, inhospitable manners, and inflexibility in our methods damage our witness and testimony of Christ?

Remember that we have an example who has gone before us – ***who emptied Himself, taking on the form of a servant . . . He humbled Himself by becoming became obedient unto death, even death on a cross*** (Philippians 2:8-9).

- If Jesus showed such humility, can we ever justify demonstrating self-righteous pride in what we do? Why or why not?
- What are some ways that you have witnessed wisdom and obedience lived out by those in your church body?
- Why do or don't you think pride deserves the hatred of God (Proverbs 8:13)?

Discussion Guide Cont.

The tale of Diotrephes is a warning to us personally. With sincere self-reflection, think over the questions that were raised in the sermon.

- Am I attending my church because of what it can do for me?
- Am I willing to serve in my church even if no one recognizes, or notices me?
- Am I teachable when challenged or corrected with the way I think or act?
- Do I always have to be right . . . do I always have to be first . . . do I always have to be in front?

Gospel Connection:

Jesus was God incarnate who came to earth to die on the cross for the sins of the unregenerate. God the Son walked among us as an example of a sinless life and of righteous living with humility and meekness, opposing pride.

Practical implications:

Think: Am I living a life of pride or do I have a teachable heart? Do I scoff and hate those who rebuke me, or do I love the rebuke of a wise man?

Pray: Thank God for providing examples for us through the lives of Jesus, John and Diotrephes that help us to live godly lives. Ask His help to remain teachable and live wisely.

Do: Remember that all that we have and do is through the power of the Lord. Seek to do all things for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The Devil in Diotrephes

Postcards from John, Part 12

3 John 9-10

Mark Twain humorously said on one occasion, “If I ever achieve humility, I’ll sure be proud of it.”ⁱ

Isn’t that human nature? “If I ever achieve humility, I’ll sure be proud of it!”

Which is why humility is that one attribute, when the moment you think you’ve got it, you just lost it.

In his classic fictional masterpiece on temptation and sin and the fallen human nature, British author C.S. Lewis composed a series of chapters based on the advice of Screwtape, a senior ranking demon, to his nephew Wormwood on how to trip up a Christian. The book is called *The Screwtape Letters*.

Chapter 14 is all about how to inflate the pride of the Christian man Wormwood has been assigned to keep from progressing in his spiritual walk.

Screwtape writes this advice to Wormwood:

Your patient has become humble; so have you drawn his attention to that fact? All virtues are less powerful against us once someone is aware they have them. And this is especially true of humility. So catch him at the moment when he is really humble in spirit, and smuggle into his mind the thought, “By jove! I’m being humble,” and pride – pride at his own humility – will appear. If he awakens to this danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, try to make him proud of his attempt to smother it – and so on, through as many stages as you please. (C. S. Lewis—*The Screwtape Letters*)ⁱⁱ

I love that British expression – “By jove – I’m being humble.” And the moment he says that, is the moment he’s lost it . . . he’s tripped up . . . ensnared by pride.

In our text for this morning, as we continue to expound on the third letter from the

Apostle John – turn to 3rd John; John is about to introduce us to a man who has stage 4 pride – and John is going to essentially give us the symptoms of this spiritually devastating disease.

Let’s rejoin our study at *verse 9*.

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

Now for just a moment, notice here that John has written a letter that has evidently gone missing. The Lord in His providence didn’t preserve this particular letter from John.

Most New Testament scholars believe that the letter John refers to here – is not First John or Second John, but some other letter specifically addressing the issue of this proud man, Diotrephes.

And he’d evidently written it to the church at large – notice, ***I wrote something to the church . . .***

It’s fairly easy to assume that Diotrephes, perhaps the leading elder in this church, suppressed the letter, or perhaps even destroyed it.

Which is why, many believe, that John is now writing another letter – this letter – and sending it to Gaius for safe keeping and to make sure it gets shared in the church. Diotrephes isn’t going to be able to lose this one in the dumpster or put it through the shredder.

Now keep in mind, John never explicitly tells us the position of Diotrephes in the church. Some have guessed he’s a leading deacon, or a wealthy layman, or the pastor/teacher – I personally believe he’s the pastor/teacher, but also a wealthy, influential man – more on that later.

But I think it’s good that John didn’t tell us exactly what position Diotrephes held in the church, so that we can all apply the warning equally. Because it’s possible for any and all of

us to become infected with this demonically inspired, fallen-human-nature-loving-kind-of-sin.

Now what John does next is give us a number of phrases or words that describe how bad it is.

And if you're wondering, why would the Lord preserve for us a letter where 15% of the content describes someone caught up in pride?

And why spend an entire sermon expounding on a man whom you'd never want to become? Well, that's your answer – God has given us this inspired description so we can see the kind of person we never want to become – or warn us is we already have.

Let me give you five categorical observations from this text – first:

1. His motivation was egotistical.

John writes, Diotrephes . . . loves to be first (3 John 9a).

John uses one word to say all that – it's a compound word in the original language – a combination of *philos* (for love) and *protos* (for first.)ⁱⁱⁱ

Literally, he loves first place. He's got to be first in line at recess or he's not going to be happy on the playground.

He looks great and sounds godly and seems really concerned for the well-being of the church, but underneath is a self-seeking, power-hungry, eager-desire to be king of the mountain.

John uses the present tense here to indicate that the ambition to be first is continual . . . in other words, Diotrephes never lets up.^{iv}

He just has to be first.

Someone once asked a famous conductor, "What is the hardest instrument to play in the orchestra?" and he quickly responded, "Second fiddle."

Diotrephes isn't about to play second fiddle – even to an old Apostle named John.

Speaking of – there's a wonderful clue in the name of Diotrephes. It's a Greek name which literally means, "nourished or raised by Zeus". This name was not a common name, like Gaius or John. In fact, this name was

typically reserved for members of nobility – it was used by noble and ancient families. Diotrephes was more than likely a member of the Greek aristocracy.^v

Why had the church so cowered before this man? Several commentators believe he was naturally intimidating due to his status and position in the community – and because secular status and rank had never been dealt with in his heart, he had brought it into the church.

We have a hard time learning that there are no aristocrats in the church.

There isn't a special status in the church for sneetches with stars on their bellies and all the other sneetches who don't have stars on their bellies, but, oh, if they only did – then they would be in. You can tell I've supplemented my reading with that eminent theologian Dr. Seuss.

He nailed it!

Have you ever thought about the fact that if David had killed Goliath yesterday, he would have never made it back home because of the media frenzy, the speaking tour, the photo shoots and the interviews on Christian radio and television; David would have never had the time to write any of his psalms.

There are no celebrities in the church – there are only redeemed sinners who happen to belong to *Somebody* – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords – *He's* somebody!

John pulls the mask off and reveals the brutal truth – Diotrephes wants to be that somebody . . . and because of it, he *and* the church are in grave danger.

Secondly:

2. His mind was unteachable.

Notice again at the end of verse 9

He does not accept *what we say* (3 John 9c).

What John means here is that Diotrephes is openly disregarding apostolic authority – I mean even to the point of disregarding – if not discarding an apostolic letter.

Again, in the present tense, John is describing someone who will not accept or acknowledge any authority but his own.

His ears are closed and his mind is effectively unteachable.

Solomon wrote, ***“If you rebuke a scoffer, he will hate you – but if you rebuke a wise man, he will love you!”*** (Proverbs 9:8).

Well there isn't any love going on here . . .

Diotrephes here is essentially scoffing and saying, “John who?! Who do you think you are? You don't carry any weight around here . . . in fact, I'm going to use your letters to line my trash can.”

This is the response of a foolish man who only hates John more, because John has already rebuked him.

Unfortunately, the spirit of Diotrephes is alive and well.

Ambitious, self-seeking, power-hungry individuals who want to rule out in their world but probably never make it to the top of the ladder, so they come into the church to try and make it happen in here.

A.T. Robertson was a New Testament scholar and professor at Southern Seminary in Louisville to the day he died in 1934. On one occasion, he wrote an article on Diotrephes for the Southern Baptist's publication. Weeks later, the editor informed him that 25 deacons had stopped getting the paper because they were being personally attacked. If the shoe fits . . . ^{vi}

Just to balance the scales and make the deacons feel a little better, he also wrote on one occasion that the greatest proof the Bible is inspired is that it has survived so much bad preaching. I didn't think that was funny either . . . if the shoe fits!

One of the marks of a wise individual isn't that they know more – it's that they are willing to be taught more.

Even if the truth challenges who you are and what you're doing – which lets us know that this local church in 3 John is in the hands of a very unwise man.

His motive was egotistical.

His mind was unteachable.

Third, John writes further that:

3. His mouth was disgraceful.

Verse 10:

For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words (3 John 10a).

John isn't saying “if I come” because he might not – this construction indicates that John is going to come, but he's uncertain about when he'll arrive. ^{vii}

And when he arrives – he'll deal with Diotrephes false accusations.

But notice here, Diotrephes isn't just interested ignoring John's command, Diotrephes is attempting to assassinate John's character.

And John describes the accusations here as ***wicked*** – these are wicked words!

In fact, John uses this same word for wicked five different times in his letters to describe the Devil – John calls the Devil the wicked one – it's his favorite word for describing the vile nature of the devil . . . he's all wicked.

No one missed this in the assembly. This is the Devil in Diotrephes. Diotrephes is allowing the Devil to use his mouth and his pride and his ego to divide the church.

And don't miss the fact that even though John dismisses all the accusations as unfounded slander . . . he calls it here – unjust accusations – untrue gossip – don't miss the fact that things are still being said!

Diotrephes is essentially badmouthing John. ^{viii}

And even though it wasn't true, there's little doubt that it hurt. John could have given up . . . he could have written this church off as a lost cause.

Instead, he warns the flock and faces down his accuser and courageously announces he's going to show up and expose the lies.

There's a fourth descriptive phrase about Diotrephes:

4. His mannerism was inhospitable.

John writes in the middle part of verse 10 – And not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren either . . . (3 John 10b).

In other words, Diotrephes is refusing to care for these church workers and church planters – these teachers and evangelists we’ve spent time talking about already who were being welcomed by Gaius into his home and cared for lavishly and generously by the church.

These are the associates of John the Apostle. Which means Diotrephes sees these men as a threat to his power in the church – he doesn’t want them around the people . . . he certainly doesn’t want them in the pulpit.

So he’s refusing to extend to them the courtesy of hospitality. ***He does not receive them*** . . . he is personally inhospitable.

But even that wasn’t enough for him to protect his turf – there’s one more characteristic – it’s this:

5. His method was inflexible.

Notice verse 10b.

And he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church (3 John 10c).

If he finds out someone has gone behind his back and taken care of one of these church workers – he’s actually going to kick them out of the church.

Get how twisted this has become – he’s refusing to take in godly people and he’s kicking godly people out.

Diotrephes has become a one-man wrecking crew. He was bullheaded, obstinate, pugnacious – and frankly, nobody is safe around him.

Pity the woman who brings one of these missionaries a casserole. Pity the couple who invite one of these traveling preachers to stay in their home for the night. They’re in trouble!

Get the irony of this – Diotrephes is practicing church discipline on people who are doing the right thing.

This is how twisted an unaccountable, proud, unyielding person can become when Wormwood turns humility into pride and pride into a lust for power.

John uses a verb here in ***verse 10*** that he’s putting them out of the church – a verb that can literally denote violent physical action against them.^{ix}

It’s the same word used when Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple (***John 2:15***). Diotrephes in a perverted sense is successfully hijacking this local church and literally driving away those who are walking with God.

And John the Apostle – known as the Apostle of Love – so nicknamed in his later years is going to show up and reveal why Jesus Christ nicknamed him years earlier, a son of thunder.

There’s going to be a little thunder. You can hear it off in the distance . . . there’s going to be the arrival of the son of thunder.

And the thunder isn’t going to be directed to the little lady who cooked the casserole.

The truth is, Diotrephes is all tripped up and tangled up in pride . . . he’s a man who is tragically self-destructing; his motive is egotistical, his mind is unteachable, his mouth is disgraceful; his mannerism is inhospitable, his method is inflexible.

He’s in greater danger than he could ever imagine.

Now it would be easy to pack our Bibles away and leave here in a few minutes and say to ourselves, “Man, was Diotrephes a problem or what? What a mess . . . now what’s for lunch?”

I don’t think the Lord preserved this inspired postcard so we’d feel superior to Diotrephes, or feel sorry for this church and that’s all we’d get out of it.

No, this spirit of Diotrephes – can be me . . . it can be you. This problem of status and power and pride in the church can be our church.

Let me put the warning into a few questions before we close. Let’s make it personal.

Am I attending this church because of what it can do for me?

The timing of this text is perfect for today where we are highlighting tables in the foyer after each service with ministry leaders.

Pick your team, is our theme for this campaign for volunteers. Nearly every ministry

department is gasping for volunteers . . . from ushers to choir members; from nursery workers to children’s teachers to soccer coaches.

One of the best things you could do today is go out there and pick a team . . . ask some questions . . . make some connections . . . find a team to join.

The other side of the coin is the wrong attitude.

It goes like this: when I arrive at the church – I want to check off all the boxes I need to if they expect me to keep coming:

- ✓ Readily available parking space – check
- ✓ Friendly greeters and ushers – check
- ✓ Plenty of seats to choose from in the back – check
- ✓ Music is excellent – check
- ✓ The sermon is outstanding – check

This church just works so well for me . . . I’m here because this church works out well for me. Which is another way of saying, this church works for me.

Am I willing to serve in this church even if no one recognizes, or notices me?

Some people think, “This church is this church is big enough for people not to notice me . . . I don’t have to do a thing – and no one will notice”; or – “This church is big enough that there are plenty of things I can do to be noticed.”

Am I teachable when challenged or corrected with the way I think or act?

Rebuke a wise man, Solomon wrote, and he will still love you . . . does that shoe fit you?

Do I always have to be right . . . do I always have to be first . . . do I always have to be in front?

Let’s be warned . . . and more than that, let’s be wise . . . let’s be wise as we walk with Christ and serve one another and together reach our world with the gospel of the One who modeled humility – *who emptied Himself, taking on the form of a servant . . . He humbled Himself by becoming became obedient unto death, even death on a cross* (Philippians 2:8-9).

If He demonstrated such humility in redeeming us, how can we who’ve been redeemed demonstrate such pride?

Be warned . . . somebody’s going to get hurt.

One author captured the danger when he wrote, “Pride is the mother hen under which all other sins are hatched.”^x

Pride is the mother hen under which all other sins are hatched.

So let’s be warned . . . let’s be winsome . . . and let’s be wise.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 04/14/2019 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2019 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved.

-
- i Douglas Sean O'Donnell, 1-3 John (P & R Publishing, 2015), p. 194
- ii Adapted from C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 71
- iii John MacArthur, 1-3 John (Moody Publishers, 2007), p. 256
- iv Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 801
- v Sam Gordon, 1, 2, 3 John: Living in the Light (Ambassador, 2001), p. 279
- vi Ibid, p. 336
- vii Hiebert, p. 338
- viii David L. Allen, 1-3 John (Crossway, 2013), p. 273
- ix Hiebert, p. 339
- x David Walls and Max Anders, Holman New Testament Commentary: I & II Peter, I, II, III John, Jude (Holman, 1999), p. 253