
The Epistles of John

“Good is from God”

3 John 9-14

There are people, who in their commitment to a specific point of view, lose sight of God’s call to care for one another. They will not work with anyone who doesn’t follow the party line. Sadly, the party line can be drawn over issues that are of no real consequence.

I remember one meeting of a group of pastors. An elderly pastor was highly critical of some of the younger men. Some of the churches within his affiliation had decided to send members to a Sunday School convention. It was held, heaven forbid, in a “Pentecostal” church. (The church by the way was Assemblies of God.)

Regardless of one’s position on the charismatic movement, the convention wasn’t put on by the church. The fact of the matter was the convention is a valuable service provided to the local Christian community. Laity and clergy would be well served by attending. To stay away because of some perceived differences would have been detrimental to those who could have benefited from attending.

Now, I don’t question the sincerity of the older pastor. He came out of a system and era that didn’t recognize the need to work across lines where disagreement was on secondary issues. There are basic doctrines held by orthodox Christianity which are not up for compromise. These, as we have seen elsewhere in these epistles, relate to the incarnation and the propitiatory work of Christ on the cross. These are to be the basis for separatism.

There are many individuals, who function similarly to this godly old saint. The difference though is this behavior is not due to misguided separatism. These individuals want to protect their own power and position within the church..

The problem created by these people isn’t just their own loss of fellowship. They can bring dissension and battle into the local church. In some cases this kind of activity can lead to a split within the church. People can fight with one another, and finally a church can be destroyed over these self-serving types of behaviors.

I Introduction

II A Negative Example

Verses 9-10

III A Positive Example

Verses 11-12

IV Closing Remarks

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V Conclusion

I Introduction: I suspect that John was most concerned about the behavior of Diotrephes as it related to the potential danger to the Christian community. And it is to this he spoke when he wrote the second part of his third letter. He knew the church must remain true to that which advances the kingdom. It could not follow a pattern or man, who was bringing dissension and disruption.

As we have seen in the previous session, there was much going on in this local church that was a positive testimony for the Lord. John had commended Gaius because he, and by inference, the church were providing the gift of hospitality to servants of the Lord who came through the community.

II A Negative Example: But as is frequently the case there was a fly in the ointment. This fly went by the name of Diotrephes. It appears he had a formal position within the local church. He certainly exercised considerable power. And he certainly was creating major problems through the misuse of that power.

Diotrephes wanted to hold the place of honor, or authority, within the church. He was obviously impressed with himself. He may have recognized though that authority, and for that matter respect actually rested in John, and possibly as a result resented him. Diotrephes had no interest in anything that John might have to say. What are some disruptive examples that you have observed within the church community?

Letters of warning about Diotrephes' behavior were being ignored. So John spelled out what he would do if he came to visit the church. He believed that it would be necessary to confront Diotrephes face-to-face. He spells out the specific behaviors that were unacceptable. Diotrephes was guilty of gossiping with the intent of creating problems and undermining John's authority. Gossip is contrary to Christian behavior. Paul warned about this when he said:

“ We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies” (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12).

In Diotrephes' case, he was using gossip to intentionally create trouble.

Second, unlike Gaius, Diotrephes was preventing the exercise of hospitality to Christians coming through the community. He refused to accept or provide for them. Additionally, if that wasn't enough, he wouldn't allow others to offer hospitality. He took action to expel those who endeavored to go counter to his directions. *(The structure of this church is unclear. Where did Gaius fit in relationship to Diotrephes' position?)*

III A Positive Example: Once again, John doesn't mince words. Immediately following his comments on Diotrephes, he notes believers are to model themselves after that which is good, not that which is evil. Clearly the behavior of Diotrephes is presented as evil.

John reiterates that good behavior, (what Scripture defines as good) can only occur when obedience to God is the motivator. In contrast those who do evil are functioning outside God's will. Most likely he is suggesting that Diotrephes' behavior demonstrates his lack of

godliness. And this being the case, Diotrephes is not to be a model of Christian behavior, or to be allowed to exercise a leadership position.

A third person in the local body is mentioned. This is Demetrius. He is presented in contrast to Diotrephes. This individual had a good reputation. Everyone spoke well of him. John emphasized that truth itself validated those things said about Demetrius. This means that Demetrius was functioning in the truth of the apostles' teachings and God's Word. John knew Demetrius personally and was able to give endorsement of the godliness of this person. What is the source of a good reputation within the church?

Demetrius is presented as an example of someone who abides in Christ. Diotrephes is offered as an illustration of someone who is outside the veil of the church. When a person is within the church, but not part of the body, he often chooses the role of disrupter and can be used by Satan to undermine the efforts to serve the Lord.

John warns this church about the importance of doing all in truth. In the second epistle, truth was the basis for withholding support for people claiming to represent Christ. Here truth is the criteria by which service is performed.

IV Closing Remarks: Once again John restrains himself from further comment. He desired to go to this body and intended to leave any additional comments for that opportunity.

And so, John closes his letter with a blessing of peace and greetings from those around him.

V Conclusion: This last section of the final epistles can serve as a warning to the local church. Remember that our responsibility is to make disciples in obedience to the Lord. And we carry out this work as we love Him and one another. We must never allow anything or anyone to interfere with that ministry.

This means we can disagree on secondary issues. But, at the same time these disagreements don't have to be problems. Nothing in Scripture requires that we agree on everything. But we are called to love each other anyway.

The relationships within the church are a lot like the relationships within a marriage. We don't have to agree on everything with our spouse. But we are to love him or her, and do all we can to express our love.

Where churches follow individuals instead of Scripture they are in a dangerous position. Even if the person is serving God, we are never to put them on a pedestal. Christ, not a man is the head of the church.

Second, the Biblical pattern of church authority requires a plurality of elders to be responsible for oversight of the church. No one person is ever to hold an authoritarian role within the church, no matter how sound that man may be.

Finally, there should be an effort for churches to work together to advance the kingdom. If there is accord on the basics of salvation and the foundational doctrines that have defined historic orthodoxy, then there is no cause for separatism.

Paul teaches that each of us have different gifts within the body, so that it will function effectively for the Lord.

“Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body” (1 Corinthians 12:14-20).

It may be appropriate to expand this concept to the churches which make up the Christian community.

The Holy Spirit uses individual churches with their specific styles to reach out to different members of the community. We are not in competition with each other. Each of us has specific roles that others can't fulfill. We are not called to appreciate everything that represents the style of other churches. But the Lord uses His children as He sees fit.

Diotrephes' crime wasn't that he was opposed to hospitality per se. But because he was self-centered, he interfered with others who were carrying out God's call. Too much energy has been spent in the Christian community chopping down the ministries of others, because of the way liturgy is handled, or the kind of music used, or the way people dress. We fight over translations of Scripture, (though some are so bad that they should be rejected.) We fight over theories of eschatology, (though God will work out His program regardless of how we think it should be carried out.)

We need to be praying for the ministries of all those who serve the truth of the gospel. We need to support these ministries, as God provides the opportunity. We should be willing to work with them, when it is consistent with what God has called us to be. And, we should not allow dissension and hostility to ever have fertile ground to grow within our own body.

As we serve the Lord we become a target for the spiritual attacks of Satan's kingdom. Let us remember the truths that John has presented in his three letters. We must stand for the truth of Scripture. But we must always live out this truth in love. For it is God's love that saved us.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

And in His love He gave us the truth that is both the basis of our salvation, and the foundation of our walk in obedience to Him.

If we hold fast to this we will be able to withstand the attacks of the enemy. We will be able to care for one another. We will see the lost saved. And, we will with other believers be able to advance God's kingdom in a fallen world.

Having noted these things, what lesson(s) do you hope to take from this study of the three epistles of John? Are there any practical changes you would like to make in your own life.

I would like to close by repeating for the last time in this series the following: The message of John, the New Covenant and the Bible as a whole is God's gift of salvation. We are called to spread that message, and to help all who accept it to grow in their relationship with God.

“ ... go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

And we are to live in a way that will enhance our dependency on the Lord and make it easier to carry out this command. We will do this as we obey Christ's commands.

“ ... ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Finally as we love God and each others, we will validate the Gospel, making it real to those who live around us. We are God's illustrations of His mercy. So that we may be a quality example let us,

“ ... Love one another. As I (Jesus) have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

Amen, and even so come Lord Jesus.