

Four Men and Their Reputations

3 John 1-14

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Introduction

All of us share an invaluable possession. It goes with us wherever we go, but amazingly, it also goes where we do not go. Furthermore, what you think of this prized possession is not necessarily what others think of it. I speak of our reputation. Your reputation is the estimation or evaluation of your character, integrity, and standing as a person. It may be good or bad, positive or negative. But be assured of this: (1) We all have a reputation. (2) People will watch you and talk about you. Count on it! (3) You cannot escape or lose your reputation. It precedes you, goes with you and follows you all of your life and even beyond.

Charles Spurgeon, the great British Baptist preacher in London, knew the importance of our reputation, especially for the Christian. He said,

The eagle-eyed world acts as a policeman for the church . . . [it] becomes a watch-dog over the sheep, barking furiously as soon as one goes astray. Be careful, be careful of your private lives . . . and I believe your public lives will be sure to be right; but remember that it is upon your public life that the verdict of the world will very much depend.

With that in mind let me raise 3 important questions for all of us to think about: (1) What do you think of yourself? (2) What do you believe others think about you? (3) What does God think about you? As we reflect upon these 3 questions let's examine the shortest book in the Bible, the letter of 3 John. Only 219 words, this postcard epistle has been too often neglected to the detriment of the church. Like 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon [and possibly 2 John], it is written to an individual, a man named Gaius. Written by John c. A.D. 80-95, Eusebius, the ancient church historian, says it was penned after John was released from the rock quarry island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. If this is correct, 3 John may have been the last book written in the New Testament.

The book is similar in length and style to its twin sister 2 John, and yet there are some important differences as well. Third John revolves around 4 key men and their reputation. Second John mentions no one by name. In 2 John the problem was showing hospitality to the wrong visitors. In 3 John the problem is not showing hospitality to the right visitors. In 2 John the major concern was *truth*. In 3 John the major concern is *love*.

It is easy to outline the book biographically, around the 4 men of the letter. As we look at each one of them, continue to examine yourself and see if anyone here looks something like you.

I. Gaius is a Commendable Christian (vv. 1-8).

This letter begins in the same way as 2 John, identifying the author as the elder (*presbuteros*). The word originally meant an older man, but came to convey ideas of respect, authenticity and integrity. An elder is a man of authority rooted in his spiritual maturity. John was such a man and because he had a tender relationship with the elect lady (2 John) and Gaius (3 John) there was no need to assert his apostleship. John commends Gaius in four areas of his life, areas in which we also should seek to excel.

1. Live Spiritually (vv. 1-2).

Four times John will address Gaius, the recipient of this letter, as “beloved” (*agapētos*) or “dear friend” (NIV). It expresses deep, heart-felt love for this man. John loved this man and he told him so. He also knew his spiritual life was in good health and he told him this too.

Gaius was a common name in that day and 3 men by that name appear in the New Testament: Gaius of Corinth (Rom. 16:23); Macedonia (Acts 19:29); and Derbe (Acts 20:4). Gaius of 3 John is probably none of these. All we know of this Gaius we learn from this short letter, and what we learn is outstanding.

John’s love for him is genuine; it is accompanied by “truth” (7 times). There is nothing false or superficial here. Note also the “I” is emphatic: Whom *I myself* love in truth. John is praying for Gaius to prosper in *all things* [fronted for emphasis] and to be in health as his soul prospers.

Gaius had a clean bill of health spiritually. Perhaps he was suffering some physical difficulty but his soul was “ship shape,” in top condition.

Application:

What if I were to pray for you and ask God to bless you physically to the same degree you are healthy spiritually, and he answered my prayer? What would happen?! Would you be fit, in bed, or nearly dead? Would

we need to rush you to the emergency room of the hospital and have you ushered into the ICU or CCU? We must live spiritually. Gaius was “soul healthy.” The same is God’s expectation for us.

2. *Walk Truthfully* (vv. 3-4).

Living spiritually is intimately connected to walking truthfully. John could rejoice greatly (v. 3) and have no greater joy (v. 4) because of what others were telling him about Gaius.

In doctrine and deed, Gaius was commendable and praiseworthy. There was no contradiction between his profession (talk) and practice (walk).

“My children” may indicate John had led Gaius to Christ. John was fathering spiritual children into the kingdom of God and Gaius was a child of his in whom he took great delight. Spurgeon knew the importance of this calling for every child of God, but especially those called to the ministry. He said:

You may view, dear friends, the text as specifying the pastor’s greatest reward. “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.” The minister who is sent of God has spiritual children, they are as much his children as if they had literally been born in his house, for to their immortal nature he stands under God in the relationship of sire. No minister ought to be at rest unless he sees that his ministry does bring forth fruit, and men and women are born unto God by the preaching of the word. To this end we are sent to you, not to help you to spend your Sundays respectably, nor to quiet your consciences by conducting worship on your behalf. No, sirs, ministers are sent into the world for a higher purpose, and if your souls are not saved, we have labored in vain as far as you are concerned. If in the hands of God we are not made the means of your new birth, our sermons and instructions have been a mere waste of effort, and your hearing has been a mere waste of time to you, if not something worse. To see children born unto God, that is the grand thing. Hence every preacher longs to be able to talk about his spiritual sons and daughters.

3. *Serve Faithfully* (vv. 5-6).

“Beloved (3rd time) a faithful thing you do,” John writes. What was Gaius doing? He was showing hospitality and entertaining brothers, traveling evangelists for Jesus sent from John who were strangers, persons he did not know. John knew of Gaius’ service because on their return to John they reported (“borne witness”) of his love before the church. John’s response: Just keep on doing what you are doing (the gist of v. 6). Providing lodging, food, money, encouragement, and standing with them and for them in spite of their “stranger status,” Gaius had

honored God, the gospel and John. Sensitive to the hospitality expectations of the Mediterranean/near Eastern world, John had received these traveling teachers into his home and honored the Lord and apostle who sent them. His faithful service would stand in striking contrast to the inhospitable Diotrephes.

4. *Minister Generously* (vv. 7-8).

These verses provide the reason why we should help those whom God has called and sent out. They went forth for his name's sake (the name of Jesus; cf. Acts 4:12; 5:40-41; 9:16; 15:26; 21:13; Phil. 2:9). This is the only mention of the Lord Jesus in 3 John.

They took nothing from the gentiles (*ethnikon*), pagans, unbelievers (Jew and Gentile alike). They did not attempt to finance God's work with the world's money. They depended, and rightly so, on the generosity and gifts of the church. In so doing they avoided the scandal of other peripatetic (traveling) teachers who prided themselves in fleecing the countryside.

"We (emphatic) ought" (moral imperative) to receive ("show hospitality," NIV) such in order that we may become fellow workers for the truth. We may not physically go where they go, but we can go with them by our support. Some give support. Some are sent. Both are essential as we cooperate together in the work of God.

Application:

There is no limit to how much good you can do if you do not care who gets the credit. "God multiply the sent. God multiply the supporters." Be a commendable Christian.

II. Diotrephes is a Conceited Christian (vv. 9-10).

Third John now takes a surprising and unexpected turn. If Gaius was a commendable Christian, a man by the name of Diotrephes was not. He was basically Gaius' alter-ego at every turn. Bottom line: He wanted to be "boss" in the church. With perverted ambition and a dominating spirit, he opposed the apostle John and set himself up as lord in the church. If anyone took exception to his actions, that person was censured and dismissed from the congregation. Carnality personified, Diotrephes is mirrored today by many in the church who exhibit a similar lust for power. Just as John commended Gaius in 4 areas, he condemns Diotrephes in 4 areas. His stern rebuke is instructive for us all.

1. Do Not Be Driven by Prideful Ambition (v. 9).

John wrote a letter now lost to us. Its reception met a problem in the person of Diotrephes (mentioned only here in the New Testament) who “loves to be first.” The issue here was not a doctrinal problem but personal pride. He loved being first, number 1, the top dog, the head honcho, the captain of the ship, the CEO, the center of attraction. Colossians 1:18 says only Jesus is to have the preeminence. Amazingly, Diotrephes took for himself the position only Jesus should hold. Tragically many today take for themselves the position only Jesus should hold. It may be a pastor, minister of worship or students, a deacon, prominent layman, or a powerful and influential family. We do not know who Diotrephes was. We do know he was driven by prideful ambition.

2. Do Not Display Pompous Arrogance (v. 9).

Diotrephes would not receive (“have nothing to do with,” NIV) John. Incredibly he felt the apostle had nothing to offer, nothing he needed! Such arrogance would have been culturally shameful. It is spiritually unbelievable.

Illustration:

Imagine you could hear John next Sunday, or one who had studied with him. Would you say, “Nah! We don’t need to hear anything he has to say!” Diotrephes did.

3. Do Not Deliver Perverse Accusations (v. 10).

John did not fear personal and public confrontation when a situation demanded it. If he comes and the implication is he will (cf. v. 14), he will confront Diotrephes, beginning with his perverse accusations (cf. 1 Tim. 5:20). “Prating against us” means “talking nonsense,” “gossiping maliciously” (NIV). With vicious and wicked intent Diotrephes had lied about John and slandered him. Trying to stack the deck and win the day, he would stop at nothing to get his way, even if it meant lying and acting heavy handed.

4. Do Not Dominate with Profane Activity (v. 10).

There is a sick, sad digression to Diotrephes’ behavior. Ambition→ Arrogance→ Accusations→ Actions. He acted exactly the opposite of Gaius but then went further. He slandered John, gave a cold-shoulder to these missionaries from John, stopped others who would have received them, and kicked out of the church anyone who attempted to help

them—all because he loved himself, his agenda, and had to have his way no matter what.

In a somewhat funny but all too tragic comment the great Greek scholar A. T. Robertson wrote,

some . . . years ago I wrote an article on Diotrephes for a denominational paper. The editor told me that 25 deacons stopped the paper to show their resentment against being personally attacked in the paper.

“Be not like proud Diotrephes who loved to be the boss, for when we glorify ourselves, the Lord’s church will suffer loss.”

Prideful ambition: Watch your *motives*.

Pompous arrogance: Watch your *decisions*.

Perverse accusations: Watch you *tongue*.

Profane activity: Watch your *actions*.

III. Demetrius is a Consistent Christian (vv. 11-12).

In a wise rhetorical strategy John sandwiches evil Diotrephes between godly Gaius and good Demetrius. A man like Diotrephes can be impressive, build a following and gather supporters who admire, even idolize him. John knew we all imitate, try to be like someone. Be careful who you admire. Make sure it is someone like Demetrius.

1. Pursue a Godly Example (v. 11).

Do not imitate (mimic) what is evil. We must avoid what is evil (bad) but pursue what is good. Why? It provides evidence to whom you belong. Good reveals we are from God. Evil reveals we have not seen God. Wescott said, “He who does good proves by his action that his life springs from God . . .” Ultimately we should imitate Jesus (1 Cor. 11:1). He is our supreme example who will never fail us. Yet we need earthly, every day examples to imitate as well. We need men and women to whom we can point our sons and daughters, boys and girls and say go and live like him, like her! Be careful whom you watch! Be mindful of who watches you!

2. Possess a Good Testimony (v. 12).

Demetrius probably brought this letter to Gaius. The letter would also serve as his recommendation from John. A three-fold witness is put forward to commend him. He has a good testimony: from (1) all, (2) the truth, and (3) John and his community (cf. Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Over time people have watched this man Demetrius and found him to be a man of integrity and godliness. Everyone is amazed! It is doubtful everyone

This godly leader now brings his letter to a close in a manner similar to 2 John. What closing words of wisdom he leaves them!

1. Desire the Presence of Fellow Believers (v. 13).

With a full and burdened heart John longs to come to Gaius. He will embrace him and he will confront Diotrephes. Pen and ink are nice, but they are not enough. Talk of cyber-churches sounds intriguing, but they can never be a substitute for a personal touch.

2. Desire Peace for Fellow Believers (v. 14).

John hopes to come *soon* (not later). He wants a *face-to-face* (mouth-to-mouth) up close and personal time together. A letter or email is a poor substitute. He closes with an expression of peace, something the Diotrephes affair had robbed them of. Our friends greet you—this means they say hello. They know the situation with Diotrephes and they stand with John. This is the only place in the New Testament that believers are called “friends,” perhaps reflecting John 15:13, where Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” Finally, say hello to everyone one by one, name by name. God saves us one by one. We should love and care in the same manner: one by one.

Conclusion

“Christ says we are to take the lowest [spot], but we like to take the higher. And we have a lovely rationalization for doing so because every time we take a bigger place we say that we can have greater influence for Christ. But this is not the Lord’s way. Leadership is not to be sought. Leadership is to be waited for . . . to the extent that we want power among men, to that extent we are in the flesh and the Holy Spirit has no place in us. To the extent that I demand leadership and want leadership, to that extent I am not ready for Christian leadership.”¹

James said, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6; cf. Prov. 3:34) Humility is the way of service. Humility is the key to a good and godly reputation.

¹ A 1971 quote from Francis Schaeffer cited in *Compass* (Summer 1997): 26.