

A Tale of Two Men

Text:

III 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 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 testified 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. 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 had 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. (1:15) Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them.

Introduction:

We have begun a journey through John's Epistles. We have seen that they are written entirely from the perspective of the light that has dawned from the coming of Jesus Christ. This coming is both historic and personal. Christ came. He was born, lived, taught, was crucified, rose again from the dead, and ascended to the Father. His coming into the world fundamentally changed the world. This is what John is saying when he writes in the prologue to his Gospel:

“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:4-9).

Paul says something similar in writing to Timothy near the end of his life. He writes:

“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (II Timothy 1:8-10).

Everything that Christians teach and believe and hold dear can be prefaced with the words: “because the light has shined in Jesus Christ.”

Not only did the light come into the world at the time of the incarnation, but it also comes to each of us individually. This is the reason that throughout his writings John speaks of “being born of God”. It is not enough that Christ came into history and was born of the Virgin Mary; he must be born in each of our hearts. Once he is; once the light of the Gospel has shined in our hearts, we can

never be the same. Again to quote the Apostle Paul: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (II Corinthians 5:17).

Furthermore, we established last week from II John (and we will come back to it frequently) that the light of Christ always demonstrates itself in truth and love. These are the two great gifts of Christ. Where he is, they are present. This is the reason John’s very greeting to the church in II John is: “Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son, in truth and love” (verse 3). We saw that the truth of which John speaks is the totality of the truth revealed by Jesus Christ. It is a synonym for the light. We saw that it is both the truth about Christ, and the truth of Christ. It is the truth that Jesus was speaking of in John 8 when he said: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free”. This is the reason that in our present text John says: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (III John 3). To “walk in truth” is to “walk in the light as he is in the light” (I John 1:9). We will see soon that this is the central idea of John’s letters. Finally, since the central commandment of Christ is to “love one another as I have loved you”, to walk in truth, to walk in the light, always means walking in love.

What III John contributes to our understanding of this central thesis of John’s writings is that it gives us a case history, a tale of two men, one who is walking in the light, in the truth of Christ and in love, and one who is walking in the light of his own ego. What is a theological and ethical principle in I John is a living reality in III John. This little book also teaches us the disastrous consequences of not walking in the light. Because of Diotrephes’ refusal to walk according to truth and love, the church is divided and on the point of disintegrating. This means that its testimony is being destroyed. Instead of being the light that Christians are always called to be in the world; its light is being extinguished by the ego of a single man. Sadly, Christian history is replete with such examples.

The central exhortation of this short letter is found in verse 11: “Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” The book itself gives an example of each. In this book the

light and the darkness have human faces. Gaius to whom John writes is a stellar example of walking in the light, Diotrephes, is the counter example of abandoning the light. Let us briefly examine each man.

I. Gaius

Gaius is a common Roman name. There are at least four other men by that name mentioned in Paul's letters. John writes to him individually because he has become the leader of those who are faithful to the light of Christ in face of the denial of others. We cannot reconstruct with exactitude all that has happened, but what is obvious is that Diotrephes, whom we will discuss in a moment, has taken it upon himself to exclude from the church those who disagree with him. Gaius appears to be the leader of the excluded. In this case the excluded are the true followers of Christ. It is not always those who are in control who are walking in the light of Christ. It is also not always the majority. Sometimes it is a faithful minority who keeps the light burning.

The particular issue for which the behavior of Gaius is commended is a clear demonstration of what John understands as keeping the great commandment of Christ and loving one another. Love, as a biblical principle, is always more than a feeling or a disposition. It is an action. It is not feeling good about others or feeling kindly disposed to them, it is acting benevolently towards them as God has acted towards us. John never thinks of our love towards one another outside of the light of God's love. He says, for example: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). This is the reason John, in his letters, speaks more often of "doing the truth", than of "believing the truth".

What Gaius is doing, and Diotrephes is refusing to do that is a concrete demonstration of God's love is exercising hospitality towards travelling Christian missionaries. There are many blank spaces in the existing portrait of 1st century Christianity, but one clear image is that of missionaries and evangelists that travelled from place to place preaching the Gospel and establishing churches.

They often depended on the hospitality of other Christians as they travelled. For John, receiving them and helping them on their way was a necessary part of fulfilling Christ's great commandment of love. It was not the only way, of course, but it is a concrete example of what he means by "we ought of love one another". Gaius is an example of someone who was walking in love by welcoming these travelling brothers and sisters into his home and helping them on their way at what was probably a significant personal cost. As such, he is an example to us of one who did good, one whom we should imitate.

II. Diotrophes

On the other hand, Diotrophes is the counter example. He is a leader in the church, but he is walking contrary to the light of Christ. John uses a single word to describe him that is translated by the English expression: "who loves to have the preeminence". Probably the best way to capture what he is saying in contemporary idiom would be: "the power-hungry Diotrophes". The weakness of Diotrophes that is destroying the church and extinguishing the light of Christ and leading others astray is his own ego. He is among the leaders of a parade of villains that passes through the history of Christianity. They are not the emperors, kings and dictators who have persecuted the Church from without. Their names are not Nero, Hitler, Stalin and Mao. They are rather wolves in sheep's clothing who have wreaked havoc from within because, instead of walking in the light of Christ, they have chosen to walk in the aura of their own egos.

Nothing is clearer in what Jesus had to say about those who would lead his followers than the fact that they were to be servants. John brings this lesson into clear focus in his Gospel with the account of Jesus washing the disciple's feet on the night that he was betrayed. Having finished this highly symbolic act, he then asks this question: "Do you understand what I have done for you?" To this question he answers:

“You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13: 13-17).

Diotrephes refused to wash feet. Gaius did it willingly and lovingly. John says: “follow not that which is evil, but that which is good.” Be a Gaius not a Diotrephes.