

I wonder if you like literature. If you do, or you studied literature at any serious level you might be familiar with the concept of a foil or a character whose traits are very different from the protagonist, so that they highlight the hero's traits. If you're into Harry Potter, then Draco Malfoy would be Harry's foil. Malfoy's prejudice and cruelty only emphasises Harry's loyalty and fairness. If you're familiar with Hugo Viktor's Les Misérables, Javert's obsession with the letter of the law only highlights more clearly Jean Valjean's firm belief in grace and that brings us to 3 John, 9-13. In the verses 9 onwards we are introduced to Gaius' foil, Diotrephes. Whereas Gaius is commended for his love for others and for walking in the truth, Diotrephes is 'a Christian fraud.' (David Jackman). He is a church leader who has shown himself to know nothing of the grace of God in his life. John doesn't criticize his theology. He doesn't need to. Diotrephes, by his conduct reveals what he really believes in his heart. He claimed to be a follower of Jesus, maybe he sounded orthodox when he preached and prayed, but so often actions speak louder than words. It's possible to be able to articulate the gospel without living it. Gaius had a gospel head, heart and hands but Diotrephes just had it in his head. His heart was so hardened that it was causing big problems in the church because he acted wickedly to the disruption of the mission and ministry of the church.

John Stott in his commentary speculates that John wrote to Diotrephes about requesting hospitality for those John was sending and that it was destroyed. If John sent a letter to the church with this request Gaius welcomed people into his home, but Diotrephes didn't. Not only did he refuse hospitality, he's guilty of several very destructive sins. He was proud, (v 9) "Diotrephes, who loves to be first". Pride is when we have too high an opinion of ourselves. His pride has made him overly ambitious so that he refuses to submit to the authority of the apostle himself. By refusing to submit to the apostle, he was refusing to submit to Christ. If we have genuine biblical reasons and we can't in good conscience go along with something, that's valid. But when your refusal to submit to a godly authority is motivated by pride and ambition, and you are refusing to do something good, like show hospitality to those who are on mission for the kingdom, that is a very different story. Also, his grievance is leading to gossip. (v10) that John calls 'malicious nonsense.' The original word actually describes boiling water. When you boil water it turns to empty, useless bubbles. That is not to say however that gossip isn't damaging. It may be nonsense, but it's still malicious and damages reputations. Diotrephes is stirring up trouble for John among the members. When John comes, he plans to challenge him and expose him for the sake of the church. (v 10). He is also trying to force those who want to show hospitality, like Gaius, out of the church. He's even making Gaius' life hard so John writes this letter to him to encourage his faithfulness. (v5). Diotrephes is so proud that he rejects even Christ himself by lying and gossiping and making the life of believers a misery by his godless leadership that destroys the unity and mission of the church.

There is always a danger that we have a Diotrephes hiding inside us. When our love for self becomes the most important thing and we serve for our own sake with the desire to be gloried and not to glorify God, when we use others to boost our own ego, when we abuse the power God has given to us, we are a Diotrephes. John brings the challenge to simply repent because it is so destructive.

We have a fourth and final 'Dear friend' section. (v11) Gaius was having to choose between what was right and wrong and by choosing what is right Gaius' position in the church was in danger. He might even be excommunicated. But John reminds Gaius, encouragingly and gently, of his responsibility as faithful member of the local church. 'Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Paul encourages both the Corinthians and Philippians to imitate himself so maybe the temptation was to behave towards Diotrephes as Diotrephes behaves towards him. Don't fight evil with evil. John says in 3 John, “Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God”. “We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him. Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” (1 Jn 2:3-6) Jesus is our Saviour and our example. We are called to imitate Christ in everything, and the Holy Spirit will help us as we seek to live like that. We should be able to look to our leaders to help us. Diotrephes was not one of those leaders.

As a young Christian Gaius needed mentorship and discipleship which is why, I think, John brings in another man, Demetrius, (v 12) Everyone speaks well of him, a bit like Tomothy in Acts 16. The most intriguing testimony about Demetrius is the testimony of the truth. Some take this to mean the testimony of the Spirit. I take this to mean the gospel. Demetrius' life was so in keeping with the gospel that the gospel itself bore witness to his character. Wouldn't that be wonderful, that your life was so Christlike, that the gospel itself spoke in favour of you?

Demetrius then, was a good man, put forward by John as worth imitating. And so, when things are discouraging and we don't know where to turn or how to behave, John would have us imitate those who are good examples. Read about the life of Jesus in the gospels and get to know Jesus well so when we look around at others we can see who is like him. Get to know Jesus as the one that mature Christ-like believers imitate.

John ends this third and final letter almost the same way he ended his second. He has much he could write about to Gaius, but he would rather say it in person. He calls Gaius his ‘dear friend’ four times and now he's planning to come to see him face to face. We see so clearly how highly John valued his friendship with Gaius. There is a lesson here to value gospel friendships very highly. Gospel friendships matter and they are worth preserving. They are used to encourage and build one another in the Lord. Maybe today we don't value these sorts of friendships highly enough. John, by declaring 'peace to you.' uses a highly appropriate way to end this short letter. 'Peace to you' is a prayer that is often used and usually put at the start of the letter. 2 John is one such letter. Throughout, John teaches us about the beauty and importance of gospel friendships. I can see many in this room, so treasure each other, like John treasured Gaius! It reminds us also that our peace comes from the knowledge that Jesus himself knows us all by name. And finally, the way we ensure we live these things out, is by love! AMEN