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“Beloved, I wish above all thing that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth,” III John 2.

Soul Prosperity

Lesson Aim: To contrast the sacrificial spirit of Gaius with the selfish Spirit of Diotrephes.

L77. Date: September 1966. **Text:** III John 1-14. **Topic:** Growth (Spiritual)

INTRODUCTION

Character is what a man is; reputation is what people think he is. The Third Epistle of John is a study in character. Three men of varying qualities of character appear therein. They are Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius.

Gaius is the “well beloved” brother to whom the epistle is addressed. His identity is not easy to establish. Several persons are called by this name in the New Testament. Paul alone had three friends by the name of Gaius who lived in Corinth, Macedonia, and Derbe, respectively. (See I Corinthians 1:14; Acts 19:29; Acts 20:4.) He was a brother who was worthy of Christian respect and affection, a consistent Christian who walked in the truth and was marked by hospitality. John loved him deeply.

Diotrephes was an ambitious and bigoted church official. He seems to have had undue authority in the congregation and had his own will whether it was to the best interests of the church or not. The Apostle John rebuked him sharply because he had taken undue over-lordship in the assembly of brethren. He was sick at soul and knew it not.

Demetrius seems to have been the brother who delivered the epistle from the hands of John to those of Gaius. He was a noble Christian who was held in high respect by all those who knew him. He was highly recommended by John. His dedication to the Lord and growth in spiritual things made him worthy of honor and respect

The title of today’s study is “Soul Prosperity.” It suggests that one may

prosper in body and be sick of soul or he may be sick of body and prosper in his soul. As much care as is lavished on the body to keep it vigorous and in health suggests attention should be given to the spiritual part of man's nature also. Therefore, today's study should provide an excellent opportunity for soul inventory. Are you a prosperous soul like Gaius, a sickly soul like Diotrephes, or an honorable soul like Demetrius?

EXPOSITION

1. A PROSPEROUS SOUL, 1-8.

The health of soul which marked Gaius is evident in John's wish that he might enjoy as excellent a physical health as he had spiritual health. A more worthy compliment could hardly be paid a believer. How would it be with you today if your body was in the same condition as your soul? What is it that makes a soul prosperous?

1. Truth.— **“Thou walkest in the truth,”** verses 1-4. Because he loved the Lord and was growing in grace, the beloved Gaius was marked by his life of truth. To him, truth was not cold, hard facts of theology. It was a warm reality of knowledge and fellowship with Him who said, **“I am . . . the truth,”** John 14:6. Gaius had no spirit of boasting about his loyalty to the truth while he exercised a cold and harsh spirit to others. Truth is not separate from love. If love has its proper influence in the life it will inspire truth, for truth without love is not real truth.

Observe that the spiritual prosperity of Gaius is related to a life lived in the truth. The grammatical structure of “walk” suggests a continuous action and might be properly translated, “habitual order of behavior.” John says, “I have no joy greater than that which is inspired when I repeatedly hear that my own children (in the faith) are habitually ordering their behavior in the sphere of the truth.”

This is why John wrote that he wished Gaius could enjoy the same health of body as he enjoyed health of spirit. Walking in the truth will prosper one spiritually so that he becomes an elite among God's saints. On the other hand, there is no spiritual prosperity apart from loyalty to the truth as revealed in Jesus and recorded in the Bible.

2. Love.—Both brethren in the church and strangers who knew of his reputation bore witness that Gaius expressed great charity in the church, verses 5-6. The hospitality of this man of God was extended to his brethren in the church and to strangers who were Christian believers. Hebrews 13:2 states, **“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have**

entertained angels unawares.” Gaius had not entertained angels but he had received the saints of God, which is more blessed.

Reference here is to receiving Christian missionaries who were on their tours of service. Itinerant workers were common in those days before missionary work became so well organized as it is today. Not only did Gaius receive them into his home but also he supplied their needs to help them continue on their way. It was the custom of the day to accompany your guests a little way on their journey as they left your house and if they had need to provide them with money and supplies. Gaius was noted for expressing his interest in Christian brethren and their work.

This is a mark of the prosperous soul. Watch out for that person who is selfish with his resources and unwilling to share the hospitality of his home. Jesus said, **“He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me,”** John 13:20. Not everyone in the church felt the way Gaius did, however, for Diotrephes—the self-appointed church boss—refused to receive the visiting missionaries. But his soul was impoverished while the soul of Gaius was prospering. Love to God and the brethren is a mark of spiritual life, I John 3-4.

3. Missions.—Missionaries are worthy of support by those who remain at home, verses 6-8. They have not gone out for their own advantage, but for Jesus’ sake: **“because that for his name's sake they went forth . . .”** verse 7. Moreover, they performed their work at a definite sacrifice and often at great personal discomfort. They “took nothing from Gentile” unbelievers. They had to depend upon the Christian brethren to support them. As the church supports missions she becomes a “fellowhelper to the truth,” verse 8.

But this does not mean the church should support every mission cause which is set before her. Not all teach the truth as it is in Jesus. So long as some use the work of the Lord to promote personal advantage, just so long Christian brethren must take care about what they finance. In I Corinthians 9, Paul defends the right of the missionary and pastor to receive support from the church or churches for whom he serves.

Today, the offering to support missions should be given through the local church. Each member should be a faithful steward of his finances by giving at least one tenth of his income, plus free-will offerings, to the Lord through his church. The church, then, must be a faithful financial steward in using that money to promote the work of the Lord at home and abroad. Such a system is fair, proportionate, keeps one from covetousness, encourages more liberal offerings, and will furnish ample supply to meet the financial needs of the workers. Thank God for faithful churches whose world vision inspires them to support all the work of the Lord. Since the Lord calls for

honor to Himself through the church, all such offerings should be given through the church treasury.

Here is a picture of a prosperous soul. He loves and is loyal to the truth; he loves his Christian brethren and the work they do; he has a heart which is moved for missionary expansion at home and abroad. Time to pause now and measure the prosperity of your soul by this standard.

II. A LANGUISHING SOUL, 9-11.

With Diotrephes, it is otherwise. Not one word of kindness or fellowship is spoken concerning him. This manifests no maliciousness on the part of the Apostle John. His concern is for the truth and welfare of the church, not for himself. His opposition to Diotrephes is not based on personal dislike but upon the harm that is done to the church and the work in general by any church boss who is opposed to missionary expansion. Observe the marks of the soul that is sick and impoverished.

1. Vain ambition.—The soul that is sick “loveth to have the preeminence” among his brethren, verse 9. Whatever the position he held in the church, Diotrephes has an ambition to rule the whole congregation. He refused to accept the authority of the Apostle John or those church members who agreed with the Apostle. In fact, John wrote a letter to the church but Diotrephes intercepted it and refused to heed John’s admonition. Like many of his modern descendants, he was a source of much trouble.

This brother with the famished soul exercised his authority in refusing to receive the missionary workers who would come to the church. He not only refused to receive them personally but also actively opposed anyone else in the congregation who would have done so. (This probably means he did not like the “well beloved Gaius” who was regularly receiving them into his home.)

The poor spiritual health of Diotrephes expressed itself in ambition for control. He tried to be a little pope who could run the assembly as it pleased him. He had not forsaken the doctrines of Christianity. But he looked upon the Lord's flock as his own. He did not consider the admonition of Peter, **“Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock,”** I Peter 5:3.

There are still too many people who strive for authority in their church. One denominational paper carried an article describing Diotrephes and his rule-or-ruin spirit. The editor later reported that twenty-five church leaders stopped their subscriptions to show their resentment against being attacked personally in the paper! At least the, spirit of Diotrephes recognizes itself.

May God deliver His churches from this kind of leadership.

2. Vain words.—Not only in attitude and in action, but Diotrephes showed his contempt of the beloved Apostle John by “prating’ against us with malicious words,” verse 10. Enemies of the Lord’s cause often resort to malicious slander when faced with losing their position of authority. So the sickly soul of Diotrephes expressed itself in an effort to degrade the character of an apostle of the Lord. The minister of Christ should exhibit the spirit of Him who was “meek and lowly in heart.” James gives a good rule to be applied here. **“If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain,”** James 1:26. Call this scripture to mind the next time you are subject to the tattling tongue of a church gossip. The person who will talk to you about someone else will talk to someone else about you. It is more appropriate to practice feet washing rather than tongue lashing concerning our brethren.

3. Vain interest.—Some people in the church are interested in nothing outside their local community because they will have no part in anything they cannot control, verse 10. This is the spirit of a Diotrephes manifesting itself again.

John says this empty-souled church boss not only would not receive the missionary brethren who came his way but he also forbade any member of the church to do so. If a member was gracious enough to receive a visiting missionary he would be cast out of the church! The spiritual poverty of this man was so great that whatever did not bring credit or greater esteem to himself was not permitted. Such a spirit could neither worship nor serve the Lord aright. Such a self-glorying spirit is directly contrary to the things of God. It evidences spiritual poverty.

How is it that some people can be so uninterested in missionary evangelism? How can some people go so long without praying for a missionary? How can some churches go an entire year without giving of their finances to missions? How can any pastor be content to serve in one little community when all the world is the field? But let us not judge one another. Let us rather look within and see what spirit is in our own hearts. Do you find the spirit of a Gaius or a Diotrephes?

4. Vain religion.—**“He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God,”** verse 11. These solemn words indicate that one with the spirit of Diotrephes may not even be saved. There are some church members who are not saved, of course, and when such an one gets into a position of authority he might be expected to err. Yet, it is also possible for a believer who has backslidden from the Lord to exalt himself. But he who

exalts himself over his brethren is exalting himself right out of the will of God. The way to commune with God and to please him is to go down in humility and not up in pride.

The farther one gets from God the duller his spiritual senses become. It is possible a modern Diotrephes reads these words. It is possible that the Holy Spirit has shown such a person his true self. The only way he can draw near to God is to renounce self, repent of sin, and seek the Lord in deepest humility. Blessed is the promise: "**Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up,**" James 4:10.

III. A VENERABLE SOUL, 12-14.

Three men are considered in this study. Gaius was a "well beloved" brother. Diotrephes was a church boss. Demetrius was a brother highly esteemed and of "good report" among the brethren. Of the three, two were honorable brethren and one was untrue. The percentage would run different in different churches, of course, but there are a majority of brethren in every church who love the Lord, have a deep concern for His work, and are ready to do what they can to promote the Kingdom. Thank God for every one of these brethren. Demetrius is a model for them all.

1. Reputation.—John writes that Demetrius "hath a good report of all men," verse 12. Since this epistle introduced Demetrius to Gaius, it is possible he was one of the "strangers" whose presence was opposed by Diotrephes. This brother was worthy of being received for all who knew him witnessed that he was a faithful brother.

The exact identity of Demetrius is uncertain. He may be the brother who forsook the faith but later returned, Philemon 24; Colossians 4:4; II Timothy 4:10. He may be the Ephesian silversmith who led a riot against Paul but was later converted, Acts. 19:21. There is no way to be certain. At least it is evident that he was a devout disciple of the Lord Jesus.

2. Truthful.—The life of Brother Demetrius was in full accord to the truth. This is why he had a good report of all who knew him and why John could recommend him with such freedom. The man whose life coincides with the truth of God can be trusted.

Allegiance to the truth is the secret of Demetrius' spiritual prosperity. Loyalty to the truth will produce faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity, II Peter 1:5-8. The more one grows in these virtues the more he will grow in truth and the more he grows in truth the more evident the virtues come to exist in him. This is a blessed cycle enjoyed by the soul which prospers in spirit.

3. Fellowship—The growing soul delights in brotherly fellowship, verses 13-14. John concludes his epistle with the observation that he is anxious to come and enjoy fellowship with Gaius just as Demetrius is now doing. Matters dealt with in this epistle have been too urgent to wait for that visit, however. But even a letter cannot take the place of face-to-face fellowship with a brother beloved.

One of the highest privileges in service is that of fellowship with the Lord and His believing children. The closer one walks with God the greater will be the bond of fellowship between him and his brethren. The prosperous Christian delights in brotherly fellowship with believers but most of all he delights in being called the friend of God.

CONCLUSION

This study has presented a contrast between two kinds of church members. One kind is represented by Gaius and Demetrius. The other is represented by Diotrophes. Gaius received strangers; Diotrophes refused them. Gaius humbly sought to help and encourage the Lord's servants; Diotrophes sought his own glory. Gaius welcomed brethren who were strangers to him; Diotrophes cast out some who were in the assembly and so well known as brethren. Gaius proved the reality of his profession; Diotrophes' relationship to the Lord is left in serious doubt. Using these standards, how does the reader's own heart judge him?

QUESTIONS

1. What kind of a person was Gaius?
2. What was wrong with Diotrophes?
3. What is soul prosperity?
4. What is the relation of truth and love?
5. How does missions enter into this study?
6. Why is the “church boss” spirit wrong?
7. Why should the believer be concerned about his reputation?
8. How can the Christian earn the respect of men?
9. How does James 1:26 apply to this study?
10. How can this study help you be a better church member?