



I'm sure you'd agree with the fact that the church is full of characters. When we say someone is a "character" we usually mean in some way he or she stands out. They're different, colorful and interesting. Present company excluded, of course! I've met some of the most interesting people in the world in the church. Not all of us grew up in the church, but if you did I'm sure you can conjure up the memory of some real characters. I'm not sure what it is about the church that attracts such people, but it's true.

The church I attended in college had a pastor named John Boswell. He was a character. He was an old-time fire and brimstone preacher. Every Sunday he'd stand up and welcome us to church and say the same thing, "Pull up a chair, make yourself at home, we're just common folk." Then he'd start preaching, and he'd work himself into a frenzy, turning beet red, sometimes screaming at the top of his lungs, and always ending his sermon with an invitation. We always said the guy will die of a heart attack in the pulpit! Dr. Boswell was a character.

When I was at Peninsula Bible Church as an intern I met another character. His name was Mark. The first time I saw him I had this sense we'd become good friends, and we did. I've never seen anyone who looked as much like Popeye as Mark. His was short, but his biceps were huge and chiseled as a result of the years working as a cement mason. He even smoked a pipe. He had an amazing sense of humor. To this day he can make me laugh like no one else. Mark is a character.

A couple of years later, when I finally found a church that would hire me, I met a whole new cast of characters. One of them was Bill. He was single at the time. He had a habit of showing up at our door right before dinner. It got to the point most nights we'd just set an extra place for Bill. He had a flare for the dramatic. I recall one time our youth group was getting ready to go on a mission trip to Mexico. We all gathered to pray. When Bill lifted his voice all he said was, "Do it, Lord!" I could just imagine the Lord saying, "Do what?" Bill was a character.

Today we're looking at 3 John. This is a very short but personal letter. It's a straight-shooting message from an old shepherd to one of his friends. As John wrote this short note, I wonder if he was thinking of the same idea: the church is full of characters. You see, as we read this note we meet three very interesting characters. Each teaches us something of what it means, or what it doesn't mean, to be a follower of Christ. Two of them are friends of John's; one of them isn't a friend but a fraud. It makes

me want to ask, What kind of character am I? A Christian friend or fraud?

### **Gaius: A Christian Friend**

The first character we meet is Gaius. Several men named Gaius are found in the New Testament. If you read the book of Acts and Paul's letters you'll see that two of his traveling companions were named Gaius, but Gaius was a very common name in the Roman Empire at the time, so most scholars believe John's letter was addressed to a different Gaius.

From the way John writes it seems Gaius occupied a position of leadership in the church. Maybe he was a pastor, an elder or a deacon. But John knew him on a personal level as well. Look at verse 1. He writes with warmth: "*The elder, to my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.*" When he calls him a "dear friend" he uses a term of affection. Later he'll refer to him as one of his children which may mean Gaius came to Christ under John's ministry. John says he loves him "in the truth." The truth of who Jesus is and what he accomplished for us was the context in which this love existed. The love we share is grounded in the truth we're committed to. Paul says several things about Gaius that are worth imitating.

First, he was spiritually healthy. Look at verse 2.

**Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.**

Gaius may have been physically unwell so John prays he might find good health. John isn't so spiritual he cares nothing for his physical health, but whatever infirmities Gaius had, his spirit was aglow. He may also have been poor materially as most Christians back then, but his soul was brimming with life and vitality. God cares about our physical well-being, but he wants our soul to thrive. He wants us to not just "gut it out," but to enjoy our life in the Lord.

Another thing we learn about Gaius is he lived what he believed. Look at verses 3–4.

**It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.**

Some people had come from Gaius' church and told John how he was both faithful to the truth and walked in the truth. This

gave John the greatest joy. Not only did Gaius believe the truth of the Gospel, but also he lived out what he believed. I came across some lines that are about pastors but can be applied to all:

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;  
I'd rather one would walk with me than merely show the way.  
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear;  
Fine counsel is confusing but example's always clear.  
And the best of all the preachers are the ones who live their creeds,  
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.  
I soon can learn to do it if you let me see it done.  
I can watch your hands in action but your tongue too fast may run.  
And the sermon you deliver may be very wise and true,  
But I'd rather get my lesson by observing what you do,  
For I might misunderstand you and the high advice you give,  
But there's no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.

-- Edgar Guest

Last week we encouraged you to pick up a copy of *The Purpose of Christmas* to give away to someone and invite them to one of our Christmas services. I hope you did that. I want you to know that I'm doing that as well. I have an appointment this week with a woman that cuts my hair. I've been dancing around spiritual topics with her and now I'm going to bring her that book and invite her to church. The pastors, elders and leaders of this church need to live what we say we believe. We don't know if Gaius was a preacher but the sermon his life preached spoke loudly. He was "walking in the truth" and that gives John great joy.

One of the ways Gaius did that was by using his resources to support others in the body of Christ. Look at verses 5–7.

**Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans.**

This is the third thing we learn about Gaius: he was hospitable. His home was used in the spread of the Gospel. We saw last week how important this was in that culture. People didn't stay in inns because they were considered sketchy at best. When people traveled, they'd carry letters of recommendation to vouch for their character, and people they didn't know would take them in on that basis. This was a very important service, especially for fellow believers. For the gospel to spread, preachers and missionaries would travel from place to place, and they needed a place to sleep. Gaius had opened his home to some of these men and

women and John says, "*They have told the church about your love.*" So they'd reported back to John's church how Gaius had served them in this way as an expression of love.

Notice how John urges Gaius to do even more in this regard. He says, "*Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God.*" That means bless the heck out of them. Make sure their bags are full and they have all the provision they need to do their work. Why? Because "*...it was for the sake of the Name that they went out...*" Whose name? This is the only New Testament book in which the name "Jesus" isn't mentioned, but it really is mentioned. It's **his** name John is talking about. They went out for the sake of his Name. He also reminds Gaius they received "*no help from the pagans.*" This doesn't mean they refused help from nonbelievers, but rather they didn't solicit support from them as a matter of policy. It was expected God's people would support God's work. Finally, John says we all "*ought to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.*" Not everyone is called to be a missionary, but we all have a part to play; we all can work together for the truth. It takes all of us! Like in a war, some of us are on the front lines, others of us are in the supply lines. Some of us leave our homes and families for the sake of the Name, others write checks and pray and open our homes. You need both. You need people on the front lines and on the supply lines.

You may or may not consider yourself wealthy, but we all have abilities and resources we can use for the sake of the Name. You may not be able to write a huge check, but you can open your home, make a pot of soup, and offer someone a good night's sleep. There's nothing so sad as believers who are blessed with abilities and resources but who fail to use them. Can I just encourage you to think about that? Will you make your time, your talents and your treasure available to God so you can work together with others for the truth? I think of the women in our church who put on Christmas With a Mission each year as a way to raise funds for our Mission Partners. No one told them to do that. That didn't come from a pastor or an elder. Someone had a creative out-of-the-box way to do that, and they did it for the sake of the Name.

Maybe for you it's in this area of hospitality. One of the blessings of being a pastor for so long is the chance we've had to host great servants of God in our home. Our kids had to sleep on a few Aero beds and sofa beds over the years to make room for them, but we've all been so blessed by those people. I think of the rich fellowship and fun stories we'd have missed out on if we hadn't done that. If we don't support those people, who will? There are many good causes we may support, but we should take care of our own and that means our brothers and sisters in Christ who've gone out for the Name and who the world can't be expected to support.

We even see this in the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Mary is pregnant under some very questionable circumstances. Lots of raised eyebrows; lots of gossip. No doubt Mary and Joseph had friends and relatives there. We've seen how hospitality was an obligation. By the way, Mary and Joseph didn't attempt to find a room in an inn, as some of the translations might lead you to believe. Decent people didn't go to inns. Literally, there were no "guest rooms" for them. Archeology shows houses in Bethlehem often had caves in the back of the house where they kept their prized ox or beast of burden. The guest room was in the front of the house, the animal shelter in the back. Joseph and Mary had come too late to get the guest room, so the relatives did the best they could by putting them in the back. They did what they could; little did they know their own home would be the birthplace of the Messiah. The Bible says **we** are his temple; we are his home. Today, if we let this Guest into our house, even if he's in the back, he'll change our life.

### **Diotrephes: A Christian Fraud**

But now John's tone changes as he turns to the second character. Look at verses 9–10.

**I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.**

Diotrephes was also another leader in the same church. He was a problem not only to John but to Gaius. He's very different from Gaius. Diotrephes loves himself more than others.

First of all, John's complaint against Diotrephes was "*he loves to be first.*" He was driven by personal ambition. He loved being up front. He wasn't a guy who was content to work behind the scenes; he had to have the limelight. He was proud. John says he'd written to the church with a message but Diotrephes in his pride and arrogance had refused to acknowledge John's authority. He may have refused to read John's letter to the church or even destroyed it. Whatever happened, the effect was to reject the instructions given by John. I can almost hear Diotrephes saying: "I run this church! I'm not going to be dictated to by John or anyone else!" It's interesting the name Diotrephes was uncommon back then. It was found only in wealthy families. Maybe it was social prestige at the root of this behavior. Church should never be a place where those kinds of distinctions matter.

Personal ambition lies at the root of most church problems. I have to tell you in my flesh I have to guard against this myself. My flesh likes being up here. My flesh likes being the Lead Pastor. I've seen this church grow from 350 to 3,000 people. My flesh likes to think I had something to do with that. My flesh likes **you**

to think I had something to do with it. My flesh likes you to think that most of the good ideas we have around here were really my ideas! My flesh likes to see others who I might see as my rivals fail because if they fail I look better. I get this! But I don't have to be controlled by my flesh, and neither do you.

Jesus was constantly dealing with this in his own twelve disciples. Even the night of Jesus' betrayal and arrest they were bickering over which of them was the greatest. Remember what Jesus said to them? He said, "*The greatest among you will be your servant*" (Matthew 23:11). We've heard that so many times, it just bounces off our head, but he means it.

But not only did Diotrephes love to be first, he was also a gossip. John says he was "*spreading malicious nonsense about us.*" You know athletes use that expression, "talking smack," well, that's what Diotrephes did concerning John and his friends. He said things that not only were spiteful but they were also baseless. This was character assassination. It happens in church! How the devil must enjoy this. C. S. Lewis wrote about this in *The Screwtape Letters*. He imagines he's listening to a speech given by the devil himself. The devil says to his comrades, "...the fine flower of unholiness can grow only in the close neighborhood of the holy. Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar." I would add one of the ways he does that is through gossip and lies. Let's be careful how we talk about each other.

Diotrephes wasn't content with a campaign of gossip against John, but he also refused to welcome other believers. He resented the arrival of other preachers and missionaries. He always wanted to be the one up front and in charge. Maybe he feared if his church heard another type of ministry his own would be over-shadowed. Regardless of the possible benefit to the church of hearing other teachers, he was determined to bolster up his position at all costs. He was more concerned with the glory of his own name. Not only did he refuse to have them in his home or lift a finger to help them, anyone in the church who tried to help them became his enemies who he tried to kick out of the church!

Some of you have had bad experiences with a church. You've encountered leaders who are self-centered, divisive, power hungry and maybe even spiritually abusive. What do you do with that? It's interesting that both Gaius and Diotrephes were part of the same church. How can that be? It shouldn't surprise us. Jesus once said to his disciples, "*The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away*" (Matt 13:24-25). It wasn't until the harvest that the weeds were separated from the wheat. That is what's going on here. This was a weed among the wheat. So, instead of making us disillusioned about the church and leaving the church, this ought to be something we expect from time to time. But that doesn't mean we do nothing about it. John says here, "*When I*

*come, I will call attention to what he is doing.*" John's solution isn't to sit back and do nothing. He's going to come and deal with it. I'm sure John will try to do that in as redemptive a way as possible. He'll speak the truth in love, but he won't stay silent.

### **Demetrius: A Christian Testimony**

The last character we meet in this letter is more positive. His name is Demetrius and we read about him in verses 11–12.

**Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.**

Most likely, Demetrius was the bearer of John's letter. John doesn't say a lot about Demetrius, but what he says is important. First, he says he's *"well spoken of by everyone."* That's not always good, but in this case it was good. Second, this testimony about him was confirmed not just by those who knew him but *"by the truth itself."* The truth he professed was embodied in his life. He lived it. This is a guy who took his faith seriously. He read his Bible. He was committed to the fellowship of believers. He gave of his time and his resources. He confessed his sins. That's the kind of man he was. Finally, he says, *"We also speak well of him, and you know our testimony is true."* This alone would be enough for Gaius. If he couldn't trust what others said, he could trust what John said.

In verse 11 John says, *"do not imitate what is evil but what is good."* In other words, don't imitate guys like Diotrefes, imitate guys like Demetrius. Why? Because you know those who *"do what is good are from God, but those who don't have not seen God."* He's not implying we can see God physically; this is a way of saying we've seen him in our heart.

Let me ask you, Who do you imitate? All of us, whether we know it or not, imitate others. Who do you imitate? Who do you surround yourself with? Who are the examples in your life you watch and mimic? Maybe God is calling you to be an example to others. Paul told people to imitate him just as he was an imitator of Jesus.

John concludes his letter with these words in verses 13–14.

**I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.**

**Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.**

John says, "I could keep going but I'd rather do it face to face." And then notice he sends greetings from friends and to friends. He wants these to be personal, so he says greet them by name. This is very interesting because nowhere in the NT letters are believers called friends. But here John calls us friends. Maybe he was thinking of something Jesus said at the Last Supper, *"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you"* (John 15:13-15).

It's true the church is full of characters, but even more important than that, the church is full of friends. Friends we know face to face. Friends we know by name. As we've studied 1, 2 and 3 John we've learned what it means to be friends in Christ. Friends in Christ are committed to the same truth that Jesus was God's only Son, sent by the Father to die for our sins. Frauds are not. Friends in Christ are those who obey his commands, not perfectly, but passionately. Frauds are not. Finally, friends in Christ love one another. Frauds do not. Friends look out for one another. They open their homes to friends they've never even met before. Of course, the greatest friend is Jesus. He wasn't a fraud. He's the one who laid his life down for his friends. The church is full of characters, but even more important than that, the church is full of friends.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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