

Title: Who's First?  
Text: 3 John 9-10  
Theme: The problem of pre-eminence  
Series: 3 John  
Prop Stmt: Those who put themselves first are always threatened by those who don't.

Read Text:

What a devastating statement: "who likes to put himself first." The church that Gaius is part of has a serious problem and that problem is Diotrephes. Have you ever noticed that people who "have a problem with authority" tend to not have a problem demanding that you must obey their authority without question? Let's talk for a minute about authority. The fact that this situation and this person is addressed by name in a book in the Bible should make us aware of how serious of a problem, God sees this. Every church is going to have people like this because Diotrephes is simply reflecting how the world tends to view authority. I want to be in charge so I can do what I want without question and make others do what I don't want to do, without question. And anyone who gets in my way or tries to question me, I will destroy. That sounds really extreme, but this is where it can go, as we will see. But first, I want to give you a quick theology of authority. (5 points)

1) God alone IS authority.

God can demand whatever he wants whenever he wants, however he wants. He is the Creator.

2) All human authority is vested (or given).

We are the creation. Authority is not something that we are created with intrinsically, it must be given to us. This is really important to grasp. If we abuse that authority, it should be taken away from us. If I asked you, does God give final authority over a child to the government or the parent, I suspect that most of you would say, the parent. But, what if the parent is selling his child on the internet? If the parent is abusing the child, then the parent may lose that authority. All human authority is vested and not absolute. That means that it can be taken away if the person wields that authority beyond the scope of their authority. When you voted me in as your pastor, you vested authority to me as an elder in this congregation. Does that mean that I can demand that you bring me cream stick donuts every Sunday? No! I only have authority to the extent that an elder is authorized by God as revealed in his Word. The Bible says that members of a church are to obey their elders, however, the elders are not to be men who look for obeisance. No. My authority is only so far as God's Word goes. You are not under any moral obligation to obey me if I abuse my authority. In fact, you would be obligated to remove me.

3) All human authority is limited.

Only God has unlimited authority and while God may make you a parent, a pastor, a police officer or a husband, you do not possess absolute authority and it is borderline blasphemous to

demand it. Authority can be abused and we can all tell stories about that. But good authority is a gift from God.

4) Good authority looks to share.

Jesus shared his authority with the disciples who shared it with the churches who share it with the elders who use it to feed, lead, and love the church. The history of the world is full of accounts of how authority is abused, but God has placed the church in the world to display godly, human authority. The elders of a church are to lead the church in such a way that the congregation thrives because they are fed well, led well and loved deeply. This is to set the tone for our homes.

5) Bad authority sucks in.

Instead of giving out and sharing, bad authorities demand loyalty and are constantly suspicious and threatened by others. They do not trust others. They look at authority as a gavel to pound, not as an opportunity to serve. They don't want to share authority; they don't want accountability. They demand obedience, loyalty, unquestioned. This is certainly the case with Diotrephes who is likely an elder in the church who is demanding unquestioned obedience by all. It sounds like he has run all other elders off or if there are other elders, they are yes-men who are content to never challenge Diotrephes so they can keep their titles.

Here is the immediate situation that reveals this issue that John is addressing. John has already written to this local church about the importance of supporting missionaries and church-planters (see verse 8). But Diotrephes wants nothing to do with it. This is very interesting and telling. We do not know all of the particulars, but Diotrephes does not want anyone in the church giving money to these brothers (why not?). He refuses to welcome these brothers (why not?). He stops those who do and if anyone, like Gaius does welcome them then Diotrephes puts them out of the church. In the midst of this, Diotrephes is threatened by John, and with good reason because John knows that this guy is a fraud and is calling him out.

These two verses provide 5 characteristics of an authority abusers. The first characteristic is what starts it all and is like the heading of the category. It is all downhill from there.

1. **Wants pre-eminence.** (9a) (selfish ambition)

John puts his finger right on the heart of the problem. Diotrephes likes to put himself first. He likes the authority too much. He wants it too much. He sees this position of leadership as an opportunity to get his way, not as responsibility to serve others. We should not be surprised that John identifies this and calls it out. After all, this was an issue that John and his brother James struggled with

John was most likely very sensitive to this issue since it was something that he had to address in his own life. In Matthew 20.17 Jesus and the 12 are going up to Jerusalem. On the way, Jesus

stops and takes his disciples aside so that they do not fail to understand what is going on. Jesus then tells them point blank, *“See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.”* – Matthew 20.27 I do not know how more plainly Jesus could have said it. But, James and John act like they didn’t hear a word. Matthew says, “then” (v.20), right after this, as if no one heard anything that Jesus just said, the mother of the sons of Zebedee (James and John) asks Jesus if her two sons can be numbers 1 and 2 after him when Jesus takes the kingdom. James and John were angling for prominence and they were using their mom as a pawn in their plot. The rest of the disciples are angry with James and John but not because James and John were tone-deaf and were ignoring what Jesus had said. They were angry because they were afraid that in using mama, James and John had an advantage over them. Even though 2 chapters earlier, Jesus put a child in the midst of them and said, *“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”* They did not understand leadership like Jesus did. So, Jesus says it again in another way in Matthew 20.25 and ff. *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

James and John had to be detoxed of their sinful view of authority, and you know what, they were. The way that John writes his gospel account of the life of Jesus is full of humility. His epistles are full of love. John as a maturing believer, is not what he was like as a young “son of thunder” as Jesus called him. Look at the growth in this brother. But, he clearly sees this poisonous view of leadership in Diotrephes and beloved, we always need to be aware of this first in our own lives and then in our church. If you want power, you do not understand leadership. If you want a position so that you will get some respect, you do not understand leadership. People will seek to acquire a title, even in the church in order to use that as a shortcut for respect that they hope to leverage for personal gain.

Lawncare and landscaping people have told me that the best way to keep weeds out of my lawn is to keep my grass as healthy and happy as I can. I think that is true in how a church views this issue. We do not want the weeds of a Diotrephes to get any influence, therefore, it is really important that leaders consistently embrace and model deference, humility and servant-hood. I recently asked someone who sat in on an elder’s meeting what some of his take-aways were and one of them was that he did not sense that anyone was angling for influence that everybody really wanted to serve. I told him “that’s really how it is.” I think that is the result of the healthy grass of faithfulness and humility not giving the weeds of pre-eminence any room to grow. People want pre-eminence shouldn’t have it.

In recent years, there have been several examples of “gifted leaders” who created large followings, wrote books, had tons of followers on social media, created and ran big organizations that promoted them, but on the inside, they were angry, demanding, intimidating, punishing and very controlling. Some people are drawn to a Diotrephes because

he can sound like a “man’s man.” He is bold and we need boldness. Yes, but not that kind of boldness. People who angle for influence who want positions of prominence should not have it in God’s economy. That is the heart of the problem. These next four points reveal how this manifests itself. Selfish ambition produces a blind arrogance.

2. **Refuses to submit to godly authority.** (9b) (arrogance)

*“does not acknowledge our authority”*

John was an apostle. The apostles were given authority by Christ to preach and establish churches and they mediated that authority by their presence and then by their writings (the Bible). Diotrephes gets a letter from John that is probably telling him about these missionaries or church-planters who are going to be coming through and they need support. But, Diotrephes refused to acknowledge John’s authority, but John’s authority was Christ’s authority. What Diotrephes did was satanic. Authority is a really big deal which is why humility is so foundational for leadership in the church. All human authority has to submit. There is no such thing as an unaccountable authority in this world. I said this earlier in the message, but I want to emphasize it. Only God has unlimited authority and while God may make you a parent, a pastor, a police officer or a husband, you do not possess absolute authority and it is borderline blasphemous to demand it.

Many of us struggled (chafed) under what we considered to be the abuse of power by our governor. It turns out, legally speaking that we were right. She does not possess absolute power to do whatever she wants. You recognize that. But, do you recognize that about you? Dads, husbands, managers, leaders, your authority is limited and it is not “a challenge to my authority” when someone asks you about a decision you made or want to make or they express a different opinion about it.

Here’s what happens sometimes. A husband wants to make a really big decision without consulting his wife and she believes that this decision he wants to make isn’t good, so she comes to the leadership of the church and requests some counsel. What do we say? Look, he is the leader and if wants to blow everything up, there’s really nothing we can do. Does that sound like taking care of the sheep to you? But, when we attempt to help the brother see this, there have been occasions where the brother accuses us of not supporting godly leadership in the home. He refuses to submit himself to godly authority, but demands that everyone around him submit to his and it isn’t very godly. The position of authority is not a gavel to pound, but leverage to serve. Another manifestation of wanting the pre-eminence is:

3. **Talks sinfully about godly authority.** (10a) (accusations)

*“talking wicked nonsense against us”*

The desire for pre-eminence can take you into some very bad places. The desire for pre-eminence tends to be a cover-up for insecurity. If I am in charge, then I must be somebody. If

people have to respect me, then I must be respectable. That kind of a view of power is more addictive than heroin and people will do just about anything in order to hang on to it. Here is Diotrephes maliciously gossiping about John. Diotrephes believes that John is his enemy and therefore, he must destroy John's reputation and influence so that Diotrephes can retain his hold on power.

But John? How do you talk maliciously about John? What kind of a person insinuates evil things about John? If someone is insinuating evil things about someone that you know is wise, seasoned, humble and faithful, you may be listening to a Diotrephes. I know there are bad leaders. Obviously, Diotrephes is one of them. This is part of the wisdom of having a plurality of elders, so that the authority is shared. But, we are prone to believe the worst about people, particularly leaders and malicious gossip generally works. But, it won't if we don't give it oxygen. If a person has a complaint about someone in authority, they need to address that biblically because it may be legitimate and changes may need to be made. That is what we do.

4. **Is threatened by good people.** (10b) (selfish loner)

*"he refuses to welcome the brothers"*

Look at that phrase, "and not content with that." This is what I mean how this kind of a person will go to terrible lengths. Sin is never content. Diotrephes is not content with just saying bad things, he does bad things. He refuses to welcome these good brothers. That is evil. He does not want them around. What is it? Is he unwilling to share the spotlight with them? Is he afraid that they will make him look inferior? Clearly John has called upon the church to support them, so is Diotrephes shaming John by shaming these brothers? Diotrephes refuses to share influence and is threatened by these brothers, but it gets worse.

5. **Demands unquestioned obedience.** (10c) (abuse of power)

*"and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church"*

Diotrephes will not welcome them and anyone who does will face his wrath. Diotrephes has no fear of God. He has no idea of what he is doing. Putting someone out of the church happens in some cases when the leadership of the church no longer has any confidence in a person's profession of faith. It is a weighty decision on the part of a church and according to Jesus (Matthew 18) it is to be the decision of the church. But here, Diotrephes has usurped the authority that belongs to the church and is abusing that authority in order to put out of the church people who look like followers of Jesus. Using a position in the church to punish good people is deeply evil. How did he get to this point? He likes to put himself first.

"It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."