

3 John 1:9-10

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John criticizes a man named Diotrephes who puts himself first above the church, rather than serving the believers. Diotrephes has rejected what John and other church leaders say, and has made false accusations against them. Worse still, he has worked against helping missionaries and has removed church members who wanted to support them.

Now John comes to the part of the letter that appears to be the primary reason for its sending. John states that he expects to see these believers “shortly.” But the actions of *Diotrephes* need to be condemned immediately. John states that he intends to *call attention to the deeds which he does*. These deeds render *Diotrephes* unfit to be listened to, or to be followed. Scripture is clear that we are not to judge other believers. Jesus said, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged” (Matthew 7:1). Paul stated, “Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes” (1 Corinthians 4:5a).

There is an exception, however, for false teachers: “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:15-16). Teachers and leaders are to have their deeds examined to determine whether they are worthy to be followed or listened to. John makes clear that the *deeds* of Diotrephes disqualify him from both.

John lists Diotrephes’ disqualifying deeds. First, he *loves to be first among them*. John and the rest of the disciples learned through failure that seeking to be first was not a constructive way to live. Jesus chastised them routinely for being self-seeking. An example can be found in Mark 9, where Jesus addressed the disciples who had been arguing over who was the greatest among them. Jesus’ answer for them was, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35b). John had learned that lesson well, and now applied it to Diotrephes. The Apostle Peter also learned this lesson, and states in his first epistle:

“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”
(1 Peter 5:1-4).

Seeking to be *first among them* disqualified Diotrephes from leadership. That was not his only bad deed. There was more. John stated that Diotrephes did *not accept what we say*. John wrote *something to the church*, but Diotrephes did not listen. People who desire to be *first* do not listen to others. It makes sense to listen to others if we are seeking to grow in wisdom, or to serve a mission. It makes no sense to listen to others if we desire to be *first among* the rest. Listening to others would elevate them, and being *first* means others need to listen to us.

Furthermore, Diotrephes was *unjustly accusing us with wicked words*. John uses *us* and *we* rather than “me.” This is consistent with Diotrephes desiring to be *first among them*. In each case it is plural. It is not stated who else is intended; the inference seems to be that Diotrephes was an elder seeking to have preeminence among the group of elders. The phrase translated *loves to be first* comes from the Greek word “philoprōteuōn” which is made up of “love” (“philo”) and “first place” (“prōteuōn”). This second word “proteuon” is used only one other place in the New Testament (Col 1:18) where it says Jesus is to be preeminent in all things. So, when Diotrephes assumed preeminence in the church, he was usurping the authority of Christ Himself. It is a pretty serious charge. It is a “King in the Kingdom” leadership model, rather than what Jesus taught, which is a servant leadership model.

John is an apostle of Jesus, so he has greater authority than Diotrephes. But John does not in this letter call himself the head elder. Neither does he lean on his apostleship. Rather, he appeals to the truth. He does not command. He appeals to the judgement of the church members, and encourages them to seek the truth, and to listen to Gaius, whom John loves in truth.

It makes sense that if Diotrephes wanted to be *first among them*, that he would accuse and demean any superior leader, in order to pull others down so that he could ascend. Further, he would not want to *accept what* the superior leaders said, since that would be tantamount to endorsing their superiority. Diotrephes’ appetite to be superior over the other authorities overrode what was true.

Diotrephes’ self-serving orientation further manifested in lack of hospitality. John states that Diotrephes *himself does not receive the brethren, either*. John is speaking here of the Jewish ministers who are traveling and ministering for the name of Jesus. Diotrephes goes beyond neglect, however, *and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church*. The fact that Diotrephes is putting people out of the church indicates that he was in a position of authority, likely recognized as an elder. But Diotrephes was not serving; he was commanding. He was lording over. Wherever “elders” occurs in the New Testament epistles in the context of church leadership, it is always plural. Diotrephes appeared to prefer to be a sole autocrat. John infers that this was *evil*, for the next instruction he gives to the *beloved* believers in the church, is “do not imitate what is evil, but what is good” (verse 11). Appropriately, Diotrephes means “nourished by Zeus.”

Biblical Text

I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.