

“Partners in Ministry”

3 John

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We are going to talk today about partnership in ministry. Because Jesus has enacted his redemption in the world, and has brought us into his kingdom, he’s also made us a part of his mission. That is part and parcel to being a Christian. Jesus has come to change people, communities, and societies, and he has brought those whom he is changing into this mission of change. It’s what the Bible calls the Kingdom of God. And what the Bible says about the Kingdom of God is that we all play a part in that kingdom. We each have roles to play. We each are used by God to advance that kingdom and bring life-giving change to the world. That’s a big claim. And a wonderful one—that each of us has a valuable role to play in God’s Kingdom. Or as John says here in verse 8, “we are fellow-workers for the Truth.”

But, we have a very strong tendency to get this confused. We have a strong tendency to develop a divided worldview. A view of the world that sees the real work of the Kingdom of God left to the professionals—pastors, missionaries, church people. Then the rest of us are just doing the regular stuff that doesn’t really matter to Jesus. The “non-kingdom” stuff like going to work and bathing children.

In fact, we often times have a hierarchy in our heads about who is in that “sacred” group and who is in the “regular people” group. At that top of the list are missionaries, especially the ones who are going to really far off places and speak different languages. Then there are the pastors—and especially the preachers. Or maybe especially the hospital chaplains, depending on your point of view. Those are the religious professionals and the “full time” sacred people. And then there are the rest of the schmos—the regular people who get up and go to work and take kids to school and all that. And of course, we have a hierarchy for them as well. People like doctors are at the top, and nurses and firefighters. Then folks like

bankers are down at the bottom. Also there's the lawyers—we don't even like to mention them.

But of course, even these regular people can do sacred stuff on their “off time.” So a lawyer that teaches Sunday school may be a regular guy during the week but he gets his kingdom of God activity in on Sundays. Or the banker who volunteers at the homeless shelter gets some kingdom of God points doing that kind of thing.

But the Bible never speaks in these terms. The Bible overwhelmingly communicates that God's people are called to work in all they do as if working for the Lord—to be a lawyer as a member of the kingdom of God. To be a banker as a member of the kingdom of God. And to do it all so that God might be glorified and that His Kingdom might expand. That it might be on earth as it is in Heaven. Some in that kingdom are called to minister to God's people and spread this good news in a full-time, professional way and others are not. But they are all members of the same Kingdom. They are all partners in ministry together. They are fellow-workers for the truth.

This is a very important concept in the Bible. And it's a concept that the apostle John delves into in this short letter. He has two major points that he deals with here. Two ways that our partnership in ministry together should affect us. But before we jump into those two points, let's set the stage and introduce the characters.

Who are these folks called to be fellow-workers together. Well, we have the author, the apostle John (probably quite old at the time). And we have the addressee of the letter, a man named Gaius, who is well loved by John and has some amount of authority in the church he is a part of (he may be an elder in his local church). And then there are “the brothers,” who seem to be traveling missionaries who are moving through the Greek world at the time, spreading the good news of the Gospel of Christ and seeking hospitality and support from the Christians in the area. Then there's Diotrephese, the villain in the play, who like Gaius, also has some power in the local church, and may also be an elder. Finally, we have Demetrius, who is either one of those travelling missionaries or the one who is delivering this letter.

So, with the stage set, let's jump in and see what is going on in this letter and what John has to say to us this morning. I told you that we were going to look at two major points—well here's the first: *Because we are partners in ministry together, Christians are called to get involved in the mission of those with different roles.*

Look at verse 5. John says, “Beloved (he’s talking to Gaius here), it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for the brothers (that’s the travelling missionaries we talked about), strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers or the truth.”

John is commending Gaius for his gracious hospitality toward those who are called to a different role than he is; they have been called to spread the Gospel to the unbelieving world. To preach the good news to those who need to hear it. To proclaim the wonderful news that Jesus Christ has lived a perfect life, died an atoning death, and been raised to life so that we might be saved. To preach that Christ has overcome death and sin, and that He is Lord of all. To preach that identity is found in Jesus alone and not in our own efforts. That is their role and their purpose. But Gaius and the rest of the church has been brought into that purpose. These people need a place to stay and they need food and they need money. They are not asking unbelievers to pay them—that would be wholly inappropriate. Christianity is never a “pay for play” endeavor. We are not selling tickets to heaven. No, it’s the responsibility of the rest of God’s people to host these missionaries and send them out with support. We are part of God’s mission together. We are fellow-workers for the Truth.

This church does a fabulous job of supporting missionaries. Did you know that we have about 20 global ministry partners we support? And about 20 local missions that the church supports? Many of you give your time and your money to these and other missions. This is really one of the unique and wonderful things about this church—you are very generous in supporting those whose role it is to see the Gospel spread in word and deed through our city and our world. So let me remind you of this wonderful truth—you are partner in ministry with these people. You are a fellow-worker for the truth. Pray for them. Because guess what? They pray for

you. They pray in thanksgiving that they are a partner in ministry with you—not just in the ministry they are doing, but in the part of the Kingdom that you are called to as well. As a banker, or a lawyer, or a computer programmer, or a teacher or a student, or a wife or mother, or husband or mechanic.

That's the first implication of our partnership. Because we are part of God's Mission together, we can get involved in the mission of those with different roles.

The second implication is this: *Because we are partners in ministry together, we sometimes need to get out of the way.* The first implication is that we need to get involved and the second though is that sometimes we need to uninvolved ourselves; we need to get ourselves out of the way. Let me explain. Look at verses 9-10 again. "I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to, and puts them out of the church."

Diotrephes, it seems, has an amount of authority and power in the church. But he is using that authority and power not as a partner in ministry with others, but in order to build himself up. Look at what he's done—he has slandered John. He has refused to host these missionaries that John has commended. And he even has excommunicated the folks who have taken them in. He has done it all because he likes to put himself first. He wants to see himself as preeminent. This is really classic territorialism and power abuse. I have my little area of power and authority and I am going to lock it down. You can't come and mess with my stuff. If you do, I'll use my power to make sure you get nothing.

Let's talk for a minute about that concept of power. We often think of power as a nasty word, but the Bible does not introduce it that way. In fact, in the beginning, God, who is all powerful, shares some of his power with his creatures. He gives them creative power and calls them to exercise it—to be fruitful and multiply. To cultivate and expand. To fill the earth with the glory of God. To expand this gift of power throughout the whole earth. But as sin enters the world, power, like everything else, gets twisted and broken. And now we are tempted constantly to misuse it and keep it for our own.

The author Andy Crouch has written a wonderful book about power, called *Playing God*. In the book he gives an illustration from his own life. He was learning to play the cello as an adult. He describes how at the beginning of his lessons, his instructor has all the cello-playing power in the room. Andy had none. But as the monthly went along, Andy's power to play the cello grew. He learned things and his abilities increased. But that did nothing to the cello-playing power of his instructor. The total power to play cello has increased and it was a benefit to both of them.

But the way we often look at power is just the opposite. We think of it like a pie—there's a limited supply. And if you have a bigger piece, then it means mine is smaller. So we scrap and fight for a bigger piece and fight others who look like their piece is getting bigger because we are afraid. We fight for our territory and our own desires because we want to hold on to that power. We keep other out and we use our power to squelch those who don't agree with us. We do so because we like to put ourselves first. You must decrease so that I might increase.

But what John is saying here is that because we are partners in ministry together, because we are fellow-workers for the truth, we are called at times to get ourselves out of the way so that our fellow workers might increase. But we do so knowing that the power of the Gospel and the power of the Kingdom of God is not a zero-sum game. It's not a limited pie. It's expansive. God's power is generative, not limited. We become those who can say, like John the Baptist, "he must become greater, I must become less."

Of course, we can do all of this because Jesus became less so that we might become greater. Jesus gave himself up for us. He released his power, humbled himself and became one of us so that we might be made partners with him in ministry. So that we might be brought into his gracious kingdom. And because of that, we can get involved in the ministry of those whose calling is not like our own, and we can also get out of the way in gracious and generous ways and let go of the power that we tend to hold tightly to.