

The Epistles of John 13: Imitate the Good

11/12/2023

Scripture 1: (3 Jn. 1:9-15 ESV)

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.

Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.

Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.

I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name.

Sermon:

Next we get to look at the not so positive side of Third John.

After his encouragement and exhortation to Gaius, concerning his personal support for certain Christian missionaries, John's letter turns in an unexpected direction; at least, in a direction which we might think is unexpected for John.

“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.”

If we presume that the Gaius of Third John belongs to the “*elect lady*”, the congregation written to Second John {there is no good reason to assume that it is a different congregation, but there is also no firm textual evidence which says that they must be the same}, and that the church was generally doing well and that they were being faithful and obedient to Christ Jesus and were thus deserving of John's written praise, for him to then suddenly switch subjects and talk about someone within that congregation being antagonistic, contrary, and divisive and who was working to subvert John's authority; then that sounds more like the relationship Paul had with some of his churches than how we tend to imagine John's. But really, we should not be all that surprised by it when we consider some of our own experiences with churches or denominations.

Back in Second John, when he wrote “*I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth...*” (2 Jn. 1:4 ESV), we need to recognize that he was talking about some people in the church, but not all. Many, maybe even most, yet sadly not all of the church members were walking in truth and light and faithfulness to Christ. Then, when he concluded that letter he wrote, “*Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.*” (2 Jn. 1:12 ESV). John had more that he wanted and needed to say, yet it was not something that he wanted to commit to paper and have it read in isolation where it could be misunderstood or misinterpreted. John wanted to have a face to face conversation, in person, where hopefully a reasonable dialogue could occur and where misunderstandings could be avoided. He wanted to do this because he was hopeful for their reconciliation, for the preservation of Christian unity in love, so that their relationship would be fully restored; so that they would have the completeness of joy once again.

Some of us engage in written or digital conversations, or at least we have seen examples of them on the internet. So much context and meaning is lost from our communication when we do not have the visual and verbal cues which come from talking together in person. Sarcasm never comes out properly in the printed word. Most forms of “sophisticated humor” are utterly lost if you cannot hear a person's tone of voice or see their posture. Although John was not trying to be funny, he still did not want to have his words twisted or taken out of context by his expected opposition.

So really, even though John had high praise for this congregation in Second John and even though he had heard a good report about them, it was not a perfect church. It was a good church, maybe even a very good church, but it was not perfect. Yet, is any church perfect? No, of course not unless that church is filled with perfectly perfect people. Instead we know that every church is filled with imperfect, wicked sinners who are being sanctified and perfected by the Holy Spirit, being conformed to the image of Christ, and being transformed into saints. That was true about Christ's *ekklesia* during the 1st Century, that was true about Christ's *ekklesia* during the 16th Century and the Reformation, and it is still true about His *ekklesia* now in the 21st Century.

That is, or should be, a very encouraging reminder to myself and to other pastors. Too often people called into ministry try to become “people-pleasers”. However, no one can please everyone all of the time, but they still run themselves ragged trying to do so. Now that does not mean we do not, or should not, seek approval and affirmation from others; that does not mean we do not, or should not, care about what other people think; nor does that mean that we ought to try and upset everyone all of the time either. Instead, as we first seek to please God and remain faithful and obedient to Him, we should be glad, happy, and satisfied to please most people, most of the time, and of course, the more people and the more oftener the better!

So, reading that the Apostle John, the Beloved Disciple, had people who opposed him within the church and had people who were denying his authority and working against him, is a comforting reminder to pastors like me because his example provides us with a much more realistic expectation of life in ministry. I mean, if even the Apostle John did not please everyone, what hope do I have?

But what was the problem or issue that they had against John?

“Diotrephes, *who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.*” We see that the problem was not really a problem with John, but with Diotephes instead. John was not the problem, the real problem was the guy having a problem with John. Diotrephes wanted to be the guy in charge. He wanted to be the one with authority. He wanted to hold all the power and to be the primary influence within this *ekklesia*. That is why he was “*talking wicked nonsense against us...*”, speaking against John and his emissaries, and perhaps even John's distant *ekklesia* also. It seems clear that he had a spirit of jealousy and envy concerning John, and while it is very easy for us to speculate what about why he felt this was, we will never know the specifics in this life but we can still have a good idea why.

John, as the last living Apostle, represented the very first generation of Christian believers and by the time he was writing this (likely in the 80's or 90's) he would have been a very old man indeed. During the 1st Century the average range of male life expectancy had a high in the 50's or 60's, and men who reached such an advanced age were statistical outliers {and therefore, not statistically significant}. Yet John himself would have been over seventy years old by this time of writing {The Gospels give us very few clues about his age. He was an adult, at least thirteen or fourteen years old at a minimum, and able to leave home and follow Jesus without abandoning his responsibilities. He was younger than his brother James. When Jesus called the two brothers to follow Him, they were still working with their father, which further suggests their youthfulness. Since John's Gospel mentions three Passover occasions during Jesus' ministry (thus the reason why we believe He had a three year ministry), if John was thirteen when he was called by Jesus and 16 when Jesus was crucified in 30/33 AD, then when he was exiled by Emperor Domitian around 90 AD, he would have been 73 years old, at a minimum.}, therefore, he was ancient according to the standards of the day.

So, since “old man John” had such great authority within the church:

- Perhaps Diotrephes wanted the older generation to get out of the way and let the younger folks take charge. Perhaps to get some new blood, new ideas, and some new energy into the *ekklesia*!
- Perhaps Diotrephes did not agree with the more conservative, traditional views and practices instituted and enforced by the Apostles and the older generation. Maybe he was railing against doing things “the way we always have done them” and wanted to institute modern changes or “innovations”, like: changing the liturgy, changing the music {although to the best of our understanding, the early church refrained from music beyond Psalm singing}, maybe adding hot tea as an option for Coffee Hour, or perhaps limit who is allowed to become a member of the *ekklesia* (like maybe to only men, only

Gentiles, only free men, or only property owners). Maybe he wanted to stop baptizing babies or re-affirm and return them to the old covenant Judaistic practices.

- Or perhaps, most likely, Diotrephes simply wanted to be “the greatest” (Matt 23:11) in the kingdom, or perhaps just the greatest within his local *ekklesia*.

The point is, Diotrephes' problem with John simply was not a problem with John, but was a problem within Diotrephes. While all the details which we lack invite our imaginations to fill in the gaps, we must be careful to not read things into the text which do not belong there. Instead, we must content ourselves by remembering that while Scripture gives us everything that we need to know concerning God, about salvation, and the rule of faith in Christ Jesus, it does not give us everything that we often want to know.

Now during this period of church history, as the first two generations {the Apostles and their direct followers} of Christian believers died, continuing church governance became an issue of concern. We learn from the book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles that whenever churches were established elders, *presbyters*, and spiritually mature believers were appointed to lead and guide each individual congregation. Then through an organic practice, rather than through intentional polity, individual churches began to look to other older or more well established *ekklesia*'s and to more experienced elders for guidance, counsel, and overall leadership. This then led to the rise of the *episcopacy*: a system of church government led by an appointed *episkopos* (a Greek word which when mediated through Latin, becomes Bishop), a specialized type of elder who was equivalent to a *presbyter*, but who was set apart within the Church with the function of an overseer: as an “elder of elders”.

Soon the Church had multiple, regional Bishops like: the Bishop in Antioch (Syrian Antioch, like St Ignatius) who exerted church authority within the regions of Syria and Palestine, the Bishop in Alexandria {one of whom was perhaps the evangelist Mark, who church history records as being martyrs there} who exerted authority over Egyptian {Coptic} and other churches in Africa, {the Bishop of Rome, a title which Peter never held but which was claimed by his spiritual successors, who exerted influence and authority over Italy,} or the Bishop of Smyrna (Polycarp, appointed as such by John) who exerted influence over certain churches in the region of Asia. These Bishops were elders and pastors who were appointed out of particular *ekklesia*'s and called into a new expanded ministry of pastoral oversight. Their original function and role has been understood to be the continuation of or a worthy succession to the Apostles' ministry and initial oversight of the wider church. While these Bishops were given authority over multiple congregations, they still considered themselves as being equal, one to another and to other elders, with no Bishop claiming preeminence over any other person. Just as the Apostles were all equal, as followers of Jesus, so too were *episkopos* and *presbyters*. {It is because of these Bishops and their successors (those elders whom they ordained, by the laying on of hands, and through those whom they ordained in turn) that we confidently confess to believe in “one holy, catholic, and apostolic church” because we claim a spiritual descent from the Apostles through the lineage of ordination.} {Why do we, as Presbyterians, not have Bishops? It is because we focus upon the equivalency of *presbyter* and *episkopos*, as per their form and function, and deny the presence of any Scriptural warrant for them to be considered as a hierarchy.}

Thus we may confidently presume (when accepting the thesis that the Apostle John was the author of 1-3 John) that it was either because of the application of John's authority in oversight or his own jealousy and covetous desire to claim such a position for himself as the reason for Diotrephes' antagonism. Either reason can satisfactorily explain why Diotrephes also showed such hostility towards these missionary friends of John: in opposition or rejection of John's authority and influence over him and the local *ekklesia*, or as a means to reduce John's influence and increase his own among the congregation.

That is our reasonable presumption, but what else can we actually **know** about Diotrephes from Scripture?

- He was a leader within the congregation. He may or may not have been the *presbyter* leader, but he is certainly a leader {it does not say that he is a good leader, either} according to the weight of his influence.
- He was “puffed up”. He had a high opinion of himself, and obviously considered himself to have a degree of priority, since he “...likes to put himself first...”.
- He opposed “*the elder*”, John the Apostle, as a vicious antagonist.
 - He spoke “*wicked nonsense*” against “*the elder*”. This kind of nonsense was: empty or unsubstantiated charges and demeaning gossip {Greek: *phluareo*; and a word that is only used this once within Scripture}. A comparable charge today would be slander.
- And worst of all, because from his demeanor and tone John seems more apt to forgive Diotrephes' for offenses against himself, his refusal “...to welcome the brothers...” was what upset John the most. He was refusing to welcome and provide for the Apostle's missional emissaries and their brothers, and not only was he himself refusing to help these Christian brothers in need, he was also “...[stopping] those who [wanted] to...” help them and he was “...[putting] them out of the church.”!
 - He was using his influence for evil instead of good. He was working against the mission of the *ekklesia*. He was actively opposing the Kingdom of God, preferring to build up his own little fiefdom at Christ's expense.

This last offense: Diotrephes' offenses against the missionaries, their work, and their potential supporters; was what had gotten John riled. This made him angry. This is the issue which was prompting John to come for a visit to set Diotrephes and the *ekklesia* straight, and then put them all back upon the proper path through His loving discipline and firm correction.

Also note, that John here makes specific mention to Gaius of the fact that he had already “...written something to the church...”. Whatever it was that he had written, sounds as if it had been intercepted or suppressed through the efforts of Diotrephes. This letter might have been Second John {many older commentators believe so and I am inclined as well, but it is not certain or incontrovertible by any means, some have suggested that Diotrephes' antagonism was caused by this other letter but again, that devolves into pure speculation} or it may have been a completely unrelated letter. Regardless, whatever John had written and previously sent, he assumes that Gaius is unaware of what is going on within Diotrephes' *ekklesia* {some suggest that Gaius lives remotely and is separated by distance from easy fellowship with the congregation, others suggest that Gaius is an elder or member of another nearby but separate congregation}. That is why it is now necessary for John to prepare and prompt Gaius for a possibly difficult encounter, which he could expect to happen soon. John's words imply that Gaius knows who Diotrephes is, but that he is unaware of: what is being said about John, what he is doing to the missionaries, and what he is doing to those people within the church who want to support the missionaries.

So this letter was likely sent as a warning to Gaius, a warning against Diotrephes, because of what he may seek to do against Gaius for his faithful support of John and company and not merely a word of commendation and encouragement; those positives were all of secondary concern.

Again, there is a lot of room for speculation and we cannot be certain about many of the details or the motivations of the people involved in this situation; but what is clear, is that Diotrephes is a problem for John and the *ekklesia*, and that it was important for Gaius to know the truth about what was presently going on.

Next John tells him, “*Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.*”. This is John's consequential instruction to Gaius. This is his real exhortation. These are his true words of encouragement.

Gaius already knew what is evil and what is good: just as we know it; from John's teaching, from the Holy Spirit within him, and from all that the whole of Scripture teaches us. John wrote so that we may know who is from God and who belongs instead to the *kosmos* and to Satan. John is now expressly calling out Diotrophes within the context of this letter, and basically naming him as an antichrist because of his behavior and activities; the evident and obvious negative fruits of his sinful, unrepentant spirit.

Remember, John wrote a lot about love, *agape*. Christian *agape* was something that he was very concerned about. But, although John was always loving, that does not mean John was always nice. He called it as he saw it, just like the Apostle Paul.

- A Ball was a Ball and a Strike was a Strike and with three Strikes you are out! Therefore, John called Diotrophes Out! {“You're Outta Here!”}

That is why we are confident that Gaius was another church leader, either part of the same *ekklesia* or part of a different one. John was clearly telling him, as he tells us, to “*not imitate evil but imitate good*”; saying, “Do not be like Diotrophes, but instead be more like “me”, be more like Jesus and those who obey Him and His commandments; be more like those who walk in the light of Christ.”

So, who do we and who do you imitate in life and in faith?

John has already spent a lot of time explaining to us how we can tell the difference between people who are “*from God*” and those who have “*not seen God*”. We can tell the difference by recognizing their fruits; the things that they say, and even more importantly the things that they do.

Anyone can say anything they like, but what they do is what proves what they actually believe.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “...*if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*” (Rom. 10:9-10 ESV). So, anybody can say that they love Jesus, that they believe in Him, and that they trust in Him alone, but sometimes words are just words, mere vapor (1 John 2:4-6). Yes, saying you believe is Step Number One, but to get to Step Number Two you have to actually be doing it, if you believe it. Jesus said, “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*” (Jn. 14:15 ESV; See also 1 John 2:3), so the people who love the Lord Jesus will obey Him; they will follow His commandments, and imitate Him because He alone is Good.

Now, although no one is perfect like Jesus, and everyone disobeys His commandments, we also know that everyone who confesses their sin and repents will be forgiven. Therefore, we have to be intentionally repentant and actively trying to not sin. We must choose to not sin ourselves and we must intentionally keep ourselves separate from those who choose to revel in their sinfulness.

We must not encourage or support sin either, whether or not the world calls it legal. Murder is still murder; It is still morally wrong and an affront to God and His image, even when it is called something else and legalized. Changing the name of something, changing any claimed “identity”, can never change the substance or the reality of the thing. William Shakespeare was absolutely correct, “...a rose by any other name...” is still a rose!

But even though we Christians do still sin, the difference is we also repent of it. We try to stop sinning, relying upon the Holy Spirit for help in putting our sin to death within us. We do not willfully and belligerently choose

to engage in sinful activity, nor do we support, endorse, or vote for those who do so, because in doing so they “...[take] part in his wicked works.” (2 Jn. 1:11 ESV), just as when we support people engaged in the furtherance of the Kingdom of God, we become “...fellow workers for the truth.” (3 Jn. 1:8 ESV).

We are all judged not by our own actions alone, but also by the actions of those whom we support and aid; those whom we have given permission and charge to represent us and our desires. As it is said, “Elections have consequences.”, are you prepared for them?

So once again, who do you imitate for your life and for your faith? Do you imitate Godly individuals, working to advance Christ's Kingdom by sharing the Gospel and thankfully, performing good works of *agape* as a way to share God's holy love? Or, do you imitate worldly individuals, antichrists; those people who love and belong to the *kosmos* and who do things which are pleasing to their Satanic father, below.

Truly, I hope and pray that you know the difference and that you daily choose the Godly good over the evil.

Then John offers Gaius yet another example, a positive alternative to Diotrephes, named Demetrius. “*Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.*” Like Diotrephes, we know really little about Demetrius: who he is or where he is; but, by the way he is introduced here, he is being offered as a counter-example to Diotrephes.

He is likely a traveling missionary, like those men which Gaius has already been supporting, and he is very probably someone that has already been rejected and turned away by Diotrephes. He is likely the bearer of this letter, because now it shows itself as having the characteristics of a “Letter of Introduction”, of being a “Letter of Reference” from the Apostle John to Gaius. Concerning Demetrius:

- John offers the commendation of “*everyone*”, likely those who belong to John's *ekklesia* and other known ministry partners
- John offers the commendation of “*the truth itself*”, meaning the evidence of Demetrius' spiritual fruit; meaning that his words and his actions will testify to his belonging to Christ. This may also be a veiled reference to the Holy Spirit Himself, but the expression of the Spirit would naturally be that same evidence.
- Lastly, John offers his own personal commendation. He offers his own qualified, trustworthy, and respected opinion, anticipating that even if according to nothing else, Gaius will surely receive Demetrius based upon his encouragement.

John concludes this letter like he did Second John, “*I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.*”. He anticipates traveling and coming to visit Gaius and once again, he is surely limiting his words to avoid any confusion (whether intentional or mistakenly) and to promote the clarity which is best found within personal interaction.

Finally, the words of this letter's closing are rather unique in Scripture. “*Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name.*” The benedictory wishing of peace to his reader is ordinary and expected, while this language of “friend” seems rather unusual but it is not, and this is the final point John which is making concerning the imitation of “good.”

The word we translate here as “friend” is the Greek word *philos*, which is related to one of the many Greek words for love, *phileo*. Remember that *agape* is a self sacrificial, unrequited love for another person, while *phileo* is the love we have for a brother, or sister, or a friend and *phileo* love is best expressed through *agape*.

To be loved by God and to love God in return is to be “friends” with God (John 15:15; James 2:23). John's naming of these as “friend” is a more dear and great of an expression of love as him calling them “beloved”. Those words are partly synonymous, but they are also intensifying as well.

Everyone who claims the Name of Jesus Christ, are brothers and sisters united together in Him. While we all love our many brothers and sisters, in life and in faith, we do not always like them. We do not choose our family, but we are obligated to love them, so since we get to choose whom we call friend, our love for them is a greater kind of love because we choose to love them. Loving a friend is similar to the love that is found in adoption, a love of choice. It is a willful and wantful love, instead of a love by obligation.

This then is the beauty of Gospel love:

- God chose us to become His children through adoption, and not by generation or creation.
- We are all God's creations and He loves everyone as such, this is true, but only some have been called out to be the sons and daughters of God, “...*who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*” (Jn. 1:13 ESV).
- Therefore, since God has chosen to love us, even though we are all unlovable, He has demonstrated His love for us by giving us the great gift of His Son, Jesus because “...*while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Rom. 5:8 ESV). This is the greatest act of love ever shown, God's great act of *agape* for His *philos*.

Naming someone as a “brother” or “sister” is one of the greatest expressions of respect and depth of relationship that a person can do, but it is greater still to name them as “friend”. This is why it is such a blessing to have a sibling, or cousin, or spouse whom you love (*storge* and/or *agape*), but whom you also love as a friend (*phileo*). John told Gaius and us to “...*imitate good...*” by loving one another in this way: through our selfless and self sacrificing acts of love for strangers and neighbors alike, through our support of missionaries and other Gospel workers in their ministry, and through our greater love for all of our fellow Christian brothers and sisters as friends; we therefore imitate the greatest of good's, Jesus Christ.

“*You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.*” (Jn. 15:14-15 ESV) At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus named the disciples as His “friends” and so we are too, if we do as He commands and love as He loves.

So, “*imitate good*” and “*do not imitate evil*”. Do not be like the Diotrefes of this world, but instead be more like the Gaius's, Demetrius's, and John's in the world. Be more like Jesus.

Imitate Jesus and His Holy Spirit will continue to work in you and conform you to His likeness. Imitate Jesus until you are truly like Him. Imitate Jesus now, so that you will be ready when His Kingdom comes.

Beloved, my brothers and sisters in Christ, my friends imitate the good, because everyone who does good is from God. You are the Church, the *ekklesia*, called out by the LORD for this purpose: to love, to *agape* because you are loved. Therefore, imitate Jesus Christ and go share His love, His *agape* with everyone.

AMEN