

The Books of 1, 2, and 3 John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 13: Imitate What Is Good

3 John 9–15

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This closing passage teaches through contrast, and the teacher should draw out the doctrine of character it embodies. Diotrephes represents the danger of pride and the love of preeminence in the church, a sin that is not doctrinal error but self-seeking, and that expresses itself in resisting authority, spreading malicious words, refusing fellowship, and excluding others. Demetrius represents the quiet power of a life so consistent with the truth that it earns the good testimony of all and of the truth itself. John's exhortation, do not imitate evil but imitate good, makes plain that conduct reveals our relationship with God: whoever does good is from God, whoever does evil has not seen Him.

Because this is the final lesson of the study, the teacher should also use the closing verses to gather up the whole of 1, 2, and 3 John. John ends, as he began, longing for face-to-face fellowship and complete joy, and greeting friends by name. This reinforces the study's central vision: genuine faith is a living, obedient faith that issues in a shared life of truth, love, and fellowship among God's people, not isolated belief. The teacher should connect the dots back across the study, the Word made flesh, walking in the light, loving one another, testing the spirits, the God who is love, faith that overcomes, assurance of life, and the union of truth and love.

Formationally, the lesson aims to set before students two patterns and to call them to imitate the good. It should expose the subtle love of preeminence in our own hearts, commend the quiet, consistent life whose reputation matches the truth, and press the searching truth that we are always imitating someone. It should close the entire study by calling students to a faith that walks in the truth, loves in deed, treasures the fellowship of God's people, and is being formed daily into the likeness of Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

John describes Diotrephes as one "who likes to put himself first" and who therefore resists John, spreads malicious words, and refuses fellowship (vv. 9–10). What does this teach about the danger of pride and the love of preeminence in the church, and how does one self-seeking heart damage the whole body?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John diagnoses Diotrephes with a single, revealing phrase: he likes to put himself first. Notice what John does not say. He does not accuse Diotrephes of false doctrine. His sin is not heresy but pride, the craving to be preeminent, and from that root grow all his other offenses.

Trace how the love of being first produces the rest. Because Diotrephes wants preeminence, he resists John's apostolic authority, spreads malicious words against him, refuses to welcome the traveling brothers, and excludes those who would. Pride is not a private flaw; it reaches out to control, to tear down rivals, and to dominate the church.

Draw out the danger of this sin precisely because it can hide in religious dress. A proud man in the church may appear zealous and committed while his real aim is his own preeminence. Pride is the oldest sin, the one that turned an angel into a devil, and it is especially destructive among God's people because it masquerades as leadership and conviction.

Show how one self-seeking heart damages the whole body. Diotrephes alone disrupted fellowship, slandered faithful workers, and divided a congregation. The body of Christ is meant to be marked by humility and mutual service; a single member who must be first can poison the life of the whole. This is why Scripture so consistently warns against pride and exalts humility.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride and the love of preeminence as the root sin of Diotrephes (v. 9)
- Pride producing resistance to authority, slander, and exclusion
- The danger of pride hiding in religious dress as zeal or leadership
- The damage one self-seeking heart inflicts on the whole body

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John focus on Diotrephes' pride rather than his doctrine?
- How does the love of being first produce slander and exclusion?
- How can one self-seeking heart damage an entire congregation?

Question 2

Student Question:

John exposes Diotrephes' craving to be first. Where do you see the desire to be recognized, in control, or preeminent at work in your own heart, and how might that desire be quietly harming your relationships or your church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns the spotlight from Diotrephes to ourselves, which is uncomfortable but necessary. It is easy to condemn a Diotrephes in someone else and miss the same root in our own hearts. The love of being first is not the sin of a few villains but a temptation in every heart.

Help students locate its subtle forms. The desire to be recognized and praised. The need to be in control. The wound we feel when overlooked. The quiet competition with others. The reluctance to serve where we will not be seen. These are the everyday faces of the craving to be first.

Show how this craving harms relationships and the church. When we must be recognized, we compete instead of cooperate, resent instead of rejoice, and serve for applause instead of love. Even small doses of the desire for preeminence sour relationships and undermine the humility on which healthy church life depends.

Apply it toward repentance and the mind of Christ. The remedy is the example of Jesus, who, though equal with God, humbled Himself and took the form of a servant (Philippians 2:3–8). Invite students to name where the desire to be first operates in them, to confess it, and to ask Christ to form His humility in them in its place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The love of being first as a universal temptation, not just Diotrephes' sin
- Subtle forms: craving recognition, control, resentment at being overlooked
- Pride souring relationships and undermining humble church life
- The mind of Christ as the remedy (Philippians 2:3–8)

Discussion Prompts

- Where does the desire to be recognized or in control operate in your heart?
- How might that desire be quietly harming your relationships or church?
- How does the humility of Christ confront your craving to be first?

Question 3

Student Question:

John says Diotrephes refused to welcome the brothers and even stopped others who wanted to, putting them out of the church (v. 10). What does this teach about how pride expresses itself, not only in self-promotion but in controlling, excluding, and tearing down others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John shows that Diotrephes' pride did not stop at promoting himself; it moved to controlling and excluding others. He refused to welcome the brothers, hindered those who wanted to, and put them out of the church. Pride seeks not only to rise but to keep others down.

Explain this dynamic. The proud heart experiences others, especially the faithful and gifted, as threats to its preeminence. So it works to control who is welcomed, to silence rivals, to exclude those it cannot dominate. What looks like protecting the church is often protecting the self.

Note the particular cruelty of using church structures to exclude. Diotrephes wielded his influence to push out faithful people. Pride in the church can clothe its self-interest in the language of order, standards, or protecting the flock, while its real aim is the preservation of personal power. This is a sobering warning to any who hold influence.

Apply it broadly. Few of us can expel people from a church, but the same spirit operates wherever we control, exclude, or tear down others to secure our own standing, in families, friendships, workplaces, and ministries. Encourage students to watch for the controlling and excluding face of pride, not only its self-promoting face, and to choose instead to welcome, build up, and make room for others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride expressed in controlling and excluding, not only self-promotion (v. 10)
- The proud heart experiencing faithful others as threats
- The danger of cloaking self-interest in the language of order or protection
- The call to welcome, build up, and make room for others

Discussion Prompts

- How does pride move from self-promotion to controlling and excluding?
- Why is using church influence to exclude others especially dangerous?
- Where might you be tearing down or shutting out others to secure your standing?

Question 4

Student Question:

John warns Diotrephes will be called to account for what he is doing (v. 10). Is there a pattern of behavior in your life that you would not want brought into the light, and what would it look like to address it now rather than to be confronted with it later?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John says that if he comes, he will bring up what Diotrephes is doing. There is a coming accounting; the behavior will be brought into the light. This reflects a wider biblical truth: nothing is finally hidden, and we will each give account to God (Romans 14:12; Hebrews 4:13).

Let this prompt honest self-examination. Most of us have some pattern, a habit, an attitude, a way of treating someone, that we would not want exposed. The accounting Diotrephes faced is a small picture of the reckoning every person finally faces, and a mercy when it comes in time to repent.

Frame confrontation and accounting as mercy, not merely threat. To have a sin brought into the light while there is still time to repent is a gift. Diotrephes was being given warning. The wise

response to such warning is not defensiveness but repentance, addressing the pattern now rather than being undone by it later.

Apply it toward present action. Encourage students to bring their hidden pattern into the light themselves, before God and, where appropriate, before a trusted believer, in confession and repentance. It is far better to address it now, voluntarily and in grace, than to be confronted with it later, by others or finally by God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The certainty of giving account to God (Romans 14:12; Hebrews 4:13)
- Nothing finally hidden from the light
- Confrontation and accounting as mercy that calls for repentance
- Addressing hidden patterns now through confession and repentance

Discussion Prompts

- What pattern in your life would you not want brought into the light?
- Why is being confronted in time actually a mercy?
- What would it look like to address it now rather than later?

Question 5

Student Question:

John commends Demetrius, who “has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself” (v. 12). What does it mean to have a good testimony from the truth itself, and how is this kind of reputation different from mere popularity or self-promotion?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John turns from the warning of Diotrephes to the commendation of Demetrius, who has a good testimony from everyone and from the truth itself. The double witness is striking: not only do people speak well of him, but the truth itself testifies to him.

Explain what it means to have a good testimony from the truth itself. Demetrius’s life so conformed to the truth of the gospel that the truth, as it were, vouched for him; his character matched the message he professed. His reputation was not manufactured but was the natural witness of a life genuinely shaped by the truth.

Contrast this with mere popularity or self-promotion. Diotrephes sought to exalt himself; Demetrius simply lived faithfully, and a good reputation followed. Popularity can be won by flattery, charm, or self-marketing, but a testimony from the truth itself can only come from a life actually conformed to the truth. One is engineered; the other is the quiet fruit of integrity.

Apply it to what we seek. We are tempted to manage our image and chase the approval of people. Demetrius shows a better way: live so consistently in the truth that your reputation takes care of itself, resting on reality rather than performance. A good name that agrees with the truth is worth far more than engineered popularity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A good testimony from everyone and from the truth itself (v. 12)
- A reputation that is the natural fruit of a life conformed to the truth
- The contrast between integrity and engineered popularity or self-promotion
- Seeking a good name grounded in reality rather than image management

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to have a good testimony from the truth itself?
- How is this different from mere popularity or self-promotion?
- What would it take for your reputation to rest on reality rather than image?

Question 6

Student Question:

John points to Demetrius as a man whose life and reputation matched the truth. If those who know you best were asked, what testimony would they give about your character, and does your reputation align with the truth you profess?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question makes the example of Demetrius personal. It asks not how we wish to be seen but what those who know us best would actually say, and whether their testimony would match the truth we profess to believe.

Help students consider the gap between public image and private reality. We can cultivate a good impression among those who see us briefly while those closest, family, roommates, coworkers, would tell a different story. Demetrius had a good testimony from everyone, including, by implication, those who knew him well.

Press the alignment between reputation and profession. A Christian's life is meant to commend the truth they profess. When our character contradicts our confession, we discredit the gospel before those who know us. When it aligns, our very life becomes a testimony to the truth, as Demetrius's was.

Apply it toward integrity, not image management. The goal is not to engineer a better reputation but to become, in private and public, the kind of person whose life genuinely agrees with the truth. Encourage students to consider honestly what their closest people would say,

and to let any gap drive them not to better marketing but to deeper, more consistent walking in the truth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The alignment of character, reputation, and profession
- The gap between public image and private reality
- A Christian's life as commendation or contradiction of the gospel
- Integrity rather than image management as the goal

Discussion Prompts

- What would those who know you best say about your character?
- Does your reputation align with the truth you profess?
- Where is there a gap between your public image and private reality?

Question 7

Student Question:

John writes, "Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God" (v. 11). What does this teach about the connection between our conduct and our relationship with God, and why does John make doing good the evidence of being from God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Between the two portraits John places his central exhortation: do not imitate evil but imitate good. And he grounds it in a principle that runs through his whole first letter: whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. Conduct reveals our true relationship with God.

Connect this to the theme of the entire study. Again and again John has insisted that genuine faith shows itself in a transformed life, that those born of God do not make a practice of sin, that we know we have come to know Him if we keep His commandments. Here, near the end of all three letters, he states it once more in the simplest terms: doing good evidences being from God; persistent evil evidences that one has not truly seen Him.

Be careful to state this rightly, as throughout the study. John is not teaching that we earn relationship with God by good deeds. He is teaching that a real relationship with God produces good, just as its absence is exposed by persistent evil. Doing good is the fruit and evidence of being from God, not the price of it.

Apply it to imitation. John assumes we are always imitating someone; the only question is whom. Diotrephes and Demetrius stand for the two patterns ever before us. To imitate good,

and ultimately to imitate Christ, is the path of those who are from God. Encourage students to choose deliberately whom they will imitate, knowing that conduct reveals, and forms, the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Conduct as evidence of our relationship with God (v. 11)
- Doing good as the fruit, not the purchase price, of being from God
- The study's consistent theme: genuine faith shown in a transformed life
- Imitation as unavoidable; the call to imitate good and ultimately Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John make doing good the evidence of being from God?
- How is this different from earning relationship with God by deeds?
- Since we always imitate someone, whom are you choosing to imitate?

Question 8

Student Question:

John assumes we are always imitating someone, and calls us to imitate good. Whose example has most shaped you, for better or worse, and who in your life is worth imitating as a model of walking in the truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question rests on John's assumption that imitation is unavoidable. We are shaped by the examples we keep before us, often more than we realize. The question is not whether we imitate but whom, and whether they are forming us toward Christ or away from Him.

Invite students to trace the examples that have shaped them, for better and worse. Parents, friends, mentors, leaders, public figures, even fictional or cultural models. Some have drawn us toward the truth; others have subtly formed us in pride, worldliness, or compromise. Awareness of our models is the first step to choosing them wisely.

Point to the importance of good models. Paul could say, imitate me as I imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). God gives us faithful believers, like Demetrius, as patterns to follow. Seeking out and imitating such people is not weakness but wisdom; we grow by walking alongside those who walk in the truth.

Apply it in two directions. First, choose worthy models, those whose lives, like Demetrius's, agree with the truth, and learn from them. Second, remember that we are also models to others, and live accordingly. Encourage students to name one person worth imitating and one way they will follow that good example toward Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Imitation as unavoidable; we are shaped by the examples we keep before us
- The influence of good and bad models on our formation
- Imitating faithful believers as they imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1)
- Our own role as models to others

Discussion Prompts

- Whose example has most shaped you, for better or worse?
- Who in your life is worth imitating as a model of walking in the truth?
- Whom are you serving as a model, and what are they learning from you?

Question 9

Student Question:

John ends all three letters longing to come and speak “face to face,” so that joy may be complete, and sends greetings to “the friends, each by name” (vv. 13–15). Drawing on the whole study, why does genuine Christian faith aim not at isolated belief but at a shared life of truth, love, and fellowship among God’s people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson and a fitting capstone for the whole study, so the teacher should use it to gather up the themes of all three letters. John ends as he has throughout: longing for face-to-face fellowship, for complete joy, and greeting friends each by name. The destination of genuine faith, across all three letters, is not isolated belief but a shared life of truth, love, and fellowship.

Trace the theme back through the study. The first letter opened by declaring that John proclaimed the Word of life so that we might have fellowship with the Father and the Son and with one another, and that our joy might be complete (1 John 1:3–4). Now the last letter closes on the same notes: fellowship, friends, complete joy. The whole of John’s writing is bracketed by this longing for shared life in the truth.

Explain why genuine faith necessarily aims at fellowship. The faith John describes is union with Christ, and all who are united to Christ are thereby united to one another. To have the Son is to be brought into His family, His body, His people. A privatized, isolated Christianity is therefore a contradiction; the new life God gives is shared by its very nature. We are saved into a people, not merely as individuals.

Gather the study’s convictions. Across these letters, genuine faith is a living, obedient faith: it confesses the Word made flesh, walks in the light, confesses sin and is cleansed, keeps His commandments, loves one another in deed and truth, tests the spirits, rests in the God who is

love, overcomes the world, holds settled assurance, guards against idols and deceivers, and unites truth and love. All of this is meant to be lived together, among God's people, in fellowship that issues in complete joy.

Land it as the goal of the whole study. The teacher should help students see that the aim of studying these letters was never merely to gain information but to be formed into a people who walk in the truth, love in deed, and treasure fellowship with God and one another. Like John, we are made for face-to-face fellowship and complete joy, in the church now and perfectly in the presence of the Lord forever. Genuine faith ends not in isolated certainty but in a shared, joyful life in the truth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine faith aiming at shared life and fellowship, not isolated belief (vv. 13–15)
- The bracketing of John's writings by fellowship and complete joy (1 John 1:3–4)
- Union with Christ as union with His people; salvation into a people, not mere individualism
- The study's vision of a living, obedient faith lived together among God's people
- Fellowship now in the church and perfectly in the Lord's presence forever

Discussion Prompts

- Why is a privatized, isolated Christianity a contradiction?
- How do all three letters point toward shared life and complete joy?
- How does union with Christ necessarily unite us to His people?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this passage, and across the whole study of 1, 2, and 3 John. Name one specific way Jesus has been forming you, through these letters, into someone who walks in the truth, loves in deed, and is becoming more like Him.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This final capstone gathers not only the passage but the entire study into a personal response. Give students room to reflect on the whole journey through John's letters, and to name one specific way Jesus has been forming them through it.

Help them recall the sweep of the study: the Word of life made manifest, walking in the light and confessing sin, knowing God through obedience, resisting deceivers, the love that makes us children of God, loving one another in deed and truth, testing the spirits and resting in the God who is love, faith that overcomes the world, assurance of eternal life, the union of truth and love, watching against deceivers, faithful partnership in the gospel, and imitating what is good. Each lesson pressed a truth into the heart.

Press for one specific, honest way Jesus has been forming them. The aim is not a vague resolution but a named work of grace: a sin brought into the light, a love put into action, a fear cast out, a settled assurance gained, an idol surrendered, a humility learned, a fellowship treasured. Invite them to name where Christ has been at work and where they will keep cooperating with Him.

Frame this as formation, the goal of the whole study. The point of these thirteen lessons was never information alone but transformation, that students would actually become more like Christ. John wrote so that we might have fellowship and complete joy and walk in the truth. Encourage students to receive that as the study closes.

Close the entire study where John closes his letters, in fellowship, peace, and joy. Send students out as a people walking in the truth, loving in deed, treasuring one another, and being formed daily into the likeness of the Lord they have been beholding through these letters. Peace be to them; greet the friends, each by name.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of the whole study, not information alone
- The sweep of 1, 2, and 3 John gathered into one transforming vision
- Cooperation with Christ's ongoing work of conforming us to Himself
- Walking in the truth, loving in deed, and treasuring fellowship as the lasting fruit

Discussion Prompts

- Looking across the whole study, where has Jesus most been at work in you?
- What is one specific way you are walking in the truth or loving in deed that you were not before?
- How will you keep cooperating with Christ's work of making you like Him?