

The Books of 1, 2, and 3 John

Lesson 13: Imitate What Is Good -- 3 John 9-15

We have come to the last paragraph of John's last letter, and he ends with a study in contrasts, two men set side by side so we can see clearly what we are meant to become and what we are meant to avoid. It is one of the most practical things in all of Scripture: not an abstract lesson on character, but two real names, two real reputations, two roads diverging in the same little church.

First there is Diotrephes, "who likes to put himself first." That phrase tells you everything. Here is a man in the church who loves the chief seat, who will not welcome John or the workers John sends, who talks wicked nonsense against them, who refuses to receive the brothers and even pushes out those who would. His sin is not heresy; John never accuses him of bad doctrine. His sin is pride, the craving to be first, and see how much damage one self-loving heart can do to a congregation. Ambition in the church wears religious clothing, but underneath it is the oldest sin of all.

Then there is Demetrius, of whom John says simply, "Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself." No drama, no self-promotion. Just a quiet life so consistent with the truth that everyone who knew him, and the truth itself, spoke well of him. He is the picture of the believer whose reputation and whose Lord agree. And between these two portraits John drops the line that gives this lesson its name: "Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good." We are always imitating someone. The only question is who.

And then, like the first letter, the third ends reaching for fellowship. John has much to write but would rather not use pen and ink; he hopes to come and speak face to face. "Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name." It is a fitting close to all three letters: truth held firmly, love expressed warmly, and a longing to be together, face to face, among friends who are known and named. This is what the whole study has been pointing toward, a people walking in the truth, loving one another, becoming like the Lord they follow.

Group Discussion: John holds up Diotrephes, who loved to be first, and Demetrius, who quietly walked in the truth, and says, "do not imitate evil but imitate good." Why is the love of being first so dangerous in the church, and why is a quiet, consistent life so powerful?

Personal Reflection: John says we are to imitate good and not evil, which means we are always imitating someone. Whose example are you actually patterning your life after right now, and is it shaping you toward Christ or away from Him?

Read 3 John 9-15

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Philippians 2:3–11, the mind of Christ who, though equal with God, humbled Himself; Mark 10:42–45, the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve; 1

Corinthians 11:1, imitate me as I imitate Christ; 1 Peter 5:1–6, shepherding not by domineering but by example, and God opposing the proud; Proverbs 22:1, a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.