

3 John

Imitate Good

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to 3 John.

My dad loves to tell the story of how as a two-year old, I ‘helped’ him fix the toilet. Now that I have a two-year old of my own, I understand why he loves that story. The difference between a baby and a toddler is that a toddler wants to do things with you. Titus likes to do the things that he sees me doing. It’s a fun, relatively new stage for both of us. I’m kind of delighted to see Titus wanting to do the things that I’m doing, whether it’s picking up sticks in the yard or banging tent stakes into the ground or trying to sing along with Ellie as she’s putting him to bed. Sometimes that makes getting things done around the house, harder. He’s not exactly ready to help me mow the yard yet, though he probably thinks he is, but still I get joy of watching him learn new skills and copying good habits.

I think I’ve always known it, but in the past few months I’m really coming to understand how critical our time together is. Titus is learning how to make his way in the world, and as his parents, Ellie and I have an important responsibility to raise him up in the fear and in the admonition of the Lord. I’m reminded, daily, that Titus is watching and learning, not just from what we say but from what we do. Little eyes are watching. Little ears are listening. A little mind is processing, and in time little feet will be going and little hands will be doing what those little eyes and ears have seen and heard us do. As Titus grows older, I want to see him imitating good.

In our time in 2 John last night, we explored how God has called his church to walk together in this present age by holding fast to the truth in love. We saw how the joy that comes from abiding in the truth in love protects the church against being led astray into the deception of the evil one. We discovered how this joy serves as a great protection of the church, and we considered how important it is for us to pay careful attention to ourselves so that our joy would stand, even when we are surrounded by enemies on every side.

If 2 John is an instruction to the church on how we can remain steadfast to the truth in an age of deception and how we can remain unified in love in an age of division, then 3 John is a friendly reminder to imitate the goodness of Christ towards one another. It’s an expansion on the heart that led Paul to tell Timothy, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim 1:13-14).

John wrote this letter as an encouragement to his faithful friend, Gaius. It’s a letter of a more personal nature than what we read in 2 John. Whereas 2 John is written to another local church, 3 John is addressed specifically to Gaius, though we know John was thinking of the other believers in Gaius’ church because of what he says at the end of this letter. Gaius was a common name in the Roman Empire. We have references to several men named Gaius in the New Testament, and it would be purely speculative to say which Gaius John initially addressed this letter to, although one document from

the fourth-century, so about 2-3 hundred years after John wrote this letter, says that it was written to Gaius of Derbe, who you can find mentioned in Acts 20:4.

As we will see in a moment, there were tensions in the church, if not in Gaius' church then in a church that was near him. John wrote to Gaius to commend his faithfulness and to encourage him to continue walking in the truth, even as this trouble brewed. This letter gives us an occasion to consider how we are called to operate as believers, even when there is trouble brewing in the church. The encouragement that John gave to Gaius is intended to be an encouragement to us to imitate good and not evil. Furthermore, this letter is concerned with encouraging us in how we ought to show care and hospitality to those who have gone out into the world for the sake of the gospel.

Let's begin by reading our passage: 3 John. I pray that as we do that God would give us hearts of integrity and courage to walk in the truth in love and to dedicate ourselves to living our lives after the pattern laid down by Jesus.

Well, the key verse and the key idea of this letter is really summed up in command John gives in v. 11, "Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good." The works of our lives reflect the will of the master of our hearts, since John explains that, "Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God." From the way John rejoices in the way Gaius is walking in the truth, to the way he commends the way Gaius has treated these missionaries while they were with him, to the way he condemns what Diotrephes has been doing, it all

springs forth from this command. So in my main point, I want to pass onto you what John had passed onto Gaius:

MP: Beloved do not imitate evil but imitate good.

In our time in 3 John this evening, I want to give you three ways that we may imitate good:

A) Imitate good by Rejoicing in the Truth

B) Imitate good by showing love to those who also love the truth

C) Imitate good by fleeing selfish love

A) Imitate Good by Rejoicing in the Truth

2 John showed us the relationship between truth, love, and joy. As a refresher, we discover in 2 John that there is a dynamic relationship between truth and love: as the truth of the gospel abides in us and we abide in the truth, we are called and equipped to love one another as Christ himself has loved us. As we walk together in the truth in love, God produces great joy in us, which is a great defense against the seductive deception of our enemy, Satan, who wants to distract us from the glory of Christ and turn us against each other.

In his third letter, John introduces another element into the mix. The disciples of Christ are called to live in the truth in love towards one another, and we are called to live out the gospel by imitating what is good, which is another way of saying that we are to be imitators of Christ in all we say and do. That's the direct command that we get in this passage, which you can also find in passages like 1 Corinthians 11:1,

Ephesians 5:1, Philippians 3:17, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2:14, 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9, and in Hebrews 13:7.

John says something very important, here in v. 11, which explains how rejoicing in the truth is related to this command to imitate what is good. In the second part of the verse he says that, “Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” This is similar to what he writes in 1 John 2:28-29, “And now, little children, abide in him [Christ], so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.” For John, vision of God and being born of God are very similar things. Based on this connection in John’s writings, one commentator writes that, “Birth of God and the vision of God are to some extent equivalent. He who has been born of God has come, with the inner eye of faith, to see God. And this vision of God deeply affects his behavior. To do good is to give evidence of a divine birth; to do evil is to prove that one has never seen God.”

After Titus was born, our family had all sorts of discussion about who he looked like. We even dug up our old baby pictures so that we could compare. In some ways he looks like Ellie. In some ways he looks like me. He has inherited certain traits and habits from us. He has them because he’s our son. When someone is born of God, when they are joined to Christ by faith, they take on new traits of God. When God saves a person, He fundamentally transforms them. He gives them a new heart, with new desires, new motives. They take on

divine traits, because they’ve been joined with Christ, and now they share in his divine life and divine love. That’s what it means to be a son or a daughter of God.

When John talks about abiding in the truth, he’s not talking about just coming to the understanding that the gospel is true, he’s talking about the way the truth becomes part of us, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within believers, and for the first time they really start living.

Doing good, imitating good, as John talks about here, isn’t just doing good things. People who aren’t born again, who haven’t seen God, can do things that are objectively good, but until they do them out of a relationship of faith in Christ, those things are always corrupt because they still do them with a rebellious heart. Thomas Hooker, a Puritan pastor from the 1600’s makes the point that while men and women may be morally good in their natural state, they cannot be spiritually good until God gives them saving grace. Which means that good works are only good in the sight of a good God, when they are produced by a person who has been born of God, having believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. Which, leads us to this conclusion: in order to imitate good, in order to do good works, we must begin by believing in the truth of the gospel and by rejoicing in the truth of the gospel. Good works, like godly love, are born out of a heart of a person who has trusted in Jesus Christ.

There are two ways we rejoice in the truth of the gospel:

1) We believe the truth and we commit ourselves to it. This is God's command, 1 John 3:23-24, "that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us."

This is the command that God has given to everyone, everywhere. Some of you may be hearing this for the first time. Some of you may have heard this many times, but it's never seemed compelling until now. Most of you, sitting here, have heard this command and you have believed, and I'll get to you in a second, but for now I just want to appeal to you, if you haven't yet believed this message. You were made by God to know and love him, but because of the corruption of your sin, you cannot do that, you cannot see him, or know him as you were made to do. You stand condemned because you have broken his command to love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You are a rebel and a law breaker, and you deserve God's justice, not his love. But God, being rich in mercy, grace, and love sent Jesus, his only begotten Son, 2000 years ago, just as he said he would in his word. Jesus lived the perfect life that you and I could not. He died to make the perfect payment that our sin demanded. He satisfied God's justice by being crucified for sin, and he rose again from the grave on the third day in victory over sin. God's will for your life is that you would repent of your sin and that you would stop trying to earn God's forgiveness and that you would trust in the work of his perfect Son, and if you do that, if you believe

the truth, he promises that you will know him and that you will have eternal life with him, forever. That is the first step to rejoicing in the truth. We rejoice in the truth, first by believing the truth.

2) We rejoice in the truth by rejoicing when we see others walking in the truth.

John's joy and love just overflows here in his greeting to Gaius. Just as he told the church in 2 John how his joy was made full in their obedience to the truth, so John tells Gaius, "I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth." John loved Gaius, not just because Gaius was his friend, but because John and Gaius shared a fellowship of faith in the gospel.

Children reflect a lot about their parents in how they act. Children bring a lot of joy to their parents when they represent their parents well in how they act. So, Proverbs 10:1 says, "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother." You get that sense of parental joy in John there in v. 4, where he says, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." It's likely that Gaius had been discipled by John, and now that John has heard from others of how Gaius has been walking in the truth that he first received from John, John's joy has overflowed. John rejoiced in the truth by celebrating the effect of the truth on Gaius' life, which brings us to an important principle for understanding how God brings joy to his people in the church.

One of the ways that God provides his people with joy is by causing us to find joy in the faith and the faithfulness of

each other. Whether it's hearing about how God is opening gospel opportunities in Cambodia, or hearing about how God is sustaining the church in tense times in Kentucky, or hearing from someone in our body what they've been learning about God through their own study of scripture in their quiet time this week, we have so many reasons to have joy in one another.

Everyone you know, who has trusted Jesus as their Savior is a masterpiece of Christ. Just as you get a sense of joy and awe and excitement when you see a picture or a sculpture that someone has crafted, so we get a sense of joy and awe and excitement on an even greater scale when we see how God is shaping and honing our brothers and sisters to reflect the beauty of Jesus. It's a good thing to recognize and celebrate what God is doing in the life of another believer. It encourages them; it encourages us, and it honors God who is the one at work making all of that happen.

Rejoicing in the truth is a natural part of imitating Christ. We should make a point to encourage the faith of others by telling them what God is doing in our lives, and we should seek to be encouraged ourselves by hearing about what God is doing in theirs. Furthermore, we should celebrate the ways we see God working in the life of another brother or sister. We can encourage one another by commending the way we see them imitating Christ through good and godly works. Obviously, we should not tempt someone to sin by feeding their pride. After all, the key to godly encouragement is drawing attention to what you see God doing in someone else's life. When we do

that, we're actually encouraging one another to worship God, because we're drawing attention to his power and his glory.

It is a good and godly thing to let someone know how encouraged you are to see how they are walking in the truth the way John encouraged Gaius. As we follow John's example, I think we will find that our joy and the joy of our fellow brothers and sisters will grow. Let us make a great effort in our churches to increase each other's joy, both here and abroad by making ourselves a joy and a blessing to others.

B) Imitate good by showing love to those who also love the truth.

I can identify at least five reasons that John wrote this letter to Gaius. We've already seen two of those reasons: 1) He wrote this letter as an expression of his joy at Gaius' faithfulness. 2) A celebration/encouragement to Gaius to continue living out the truth in love. The third reason that I think John wrote this letter to Gaius was to charge him to continue to show hospitality to missionaries.

One of the distinct purposes of this letter, why it's important for us, is that it shows the relationship of truth, love, and joy to the way we treat one another, especially those who are not members of our church but who we are still connected to as they are members of the global body of Christ. John's joy was made full because of the report that was brought to him about how Gaius was walking in the truth. We get a more detailed view of Gaius' faithfulness in v. 5-6a, where John says, "Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts

for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church.”

Once again, we can see the natural relationship that exists between abiding in the truth and loving others as Christ has commanded us. John commended Gaius for walking in the truth, and we see in v. 5 that the reason John can say that Gaius is walking in the truth is because of the way he has shown love and care to these other believers. When we love others for the sake of Christ, we show that the truth of Christ is living in us.

Gaius’ love was risky and costly. These brothers were strangers to him. They had nothing to repay him for his kindness, and yet Gaius received them into his home and provided for their needs while they were with him. He showed them costly hospitality out of regard for the fact that they had gone out to preach the gospel among the nations. These same brothers had apparently gone on their way to John, and they had told him about Gaius’ faithfulness and the loving care he showed them, but I don’t think that Gaius cared for these men because he was hoping that they would give a good report to John. I think he did it strictly because he saw that they were servants of King Jesus and that they were in need.

John commends Gaius for what he did. In 6a, he gets a little more instructive with Gaius. He says, “You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God.” And he explains why in v. 7, “For they have gone out for the sake of the name (understand that this is shorthand for going out to share the gospel with others), accepting nothing from the Gentiles.” Just as Paul had gone on his many missionary

journeys to take the message of the gospel to towns and cities all over Asia Minor and Greece, and later Rome and possibly Spain, so these brothers had been sent out into the world to share the good news.

It looks like Gaius had received these brothers into his own home, that he had cared for them, and then that he had sent them on their way and equipped them for their journey. John says that this is something to be commended and replicated, for in receiving these brothers in a worthy manner, in a manner worthy of receiving God, Gaius had become a fellow worker with them in this great missionary work, just as John says in v. 8, “Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.”

Hospitality is an important Christian work. It’s a work that God commends, and it’s a work that God rewards. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 10:40, “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me...the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward.”

When these men came to Gaius, they were strangers to him, but he opened his home to them and he provided for their journey because they had gone out into the world for the sake of the name of Christ. They were in need, because as John says, they had gone out to preach to the nations, not accepting any financial support from those they had come to bring the gospel to. These brothers were not in gospel ministry to try to make a living for themselves. They went, and God provided for their needs through Gaius and others like him, who through

their support, became partners with them in this Great Commission work.

Notice that John includes himself in v. 8 when he says that we ought all to support people like these. When we talk about missions, most of our conversation tends to lean towards who we will send. But the reality is that we are all called to missions, though our role in carrying out the Great Commission may look different from the role that God has appointed for someone else. In the late 1700's and on into the 1800's, the Church in the West was battling a great deal over what the role of the local church should be in reaching people around the world with the gospel. Some felt that if God wanted to save the heathen, then he would do it without the help of local churches or the sending out of missionaries, and they opposed upstart missions organizations.

It was about this time that William Carey came around. In 1792, Carey and a few others founded the Baptist Missionary Society in the home of Pastor and Theologian Andrew Fuller. Carey left England the next year for India, and as he did he paved the way for the modern missionary movement that we know today. Before Carey left, he reportedly told Fuller and the others, "I will go down, if you will hold the rope." Much of the success that Carey and the other missionaries who were sent out by the BMS is due to the diligence of men like Andrew Fuller who held the rope by sending them out on the mission field equipped and supported.

I pray that God would raise up families in our church and here, who he sends out into the world for the sake of the

gospel. Matthew 28:18-20 is the Great Commission, not the Great Suggestion. Whether God calls anyone of us to serve as these brothers did, by going out, he has indeed called all of us to serve as partners with those who go, to hold the rope by supporting them through prayer, through finance, through hospitality, and through encouragement. God has provided each of us with a particular set of resources, and we must wield that in an effort to make much of Christ.

I have always felt like I have a special relationship with GCC. If you're a member here, I want to thank you for the way you have always shown such high regard and hospitality to our family. I want to commend you all for that, just like John commended Gaius. As I do so, I also want to charge you all, as John charged Gaius, to earnestly seek to show this sort of love in the future, both towards one another and towards strangers that God sends our way. God has given us a wealth of resources. Let's strive to leverage those resources to care for and to equip those who he brings our way for sake of the name of Christ. Let us strive to do good through our hospitality.

C) Imitate Good by Fleeing Selfish Love

Gaius was to be commended for the way he cared for the needs of these brothers, but as we find in v. 9-10 that not all was going well in the church. John says, "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.”

It’s hard to say whether Diotrephes was a man in Gaius’ church or whether this was going on in a church near Gaius. I’m inclined to think that Diotrephes was in a church near Gaius. John would hardly have to inform Gaius of the situation with Diotrephes if this was going on in his own church, and it doesn’t seem like Gaius has been put out of the church for the hospitality he showed to these strangers that John has mentioned. It’s likely that Gaius was a leader in his church, and it’s hard to imagine that he and Diotrephes would have been able to live in harmony if they were sharing that leadership.

Still, John says that he intends to come to Gaius in v. 13-14, and he says that if he does, he intends to bring up what Diotrephes is doing. Whichever is the case, we can see John’s concern for Gaius and for the church that Diotrephes has taken over. In addition to commending Gaius for his faithfulness and encouraging him to walk in love towards others, John wants to make sure that Gaius does not fall prey to Diotrephes’ selfish influence.

As we look at v. 9-10, it’s pretty clear that Diotrephes has amassed a list of charges that simply must be dealt with. The reigning feature of Diotrephes is that he likes to put himself first. He is selfish. One commentator noted that Diotrephes is a very uncommon name in the ancient world specifically because it was limited to the upper echelons of society. As the Church grew across the Empire, some of the powerful families tried to use their influence in the church.

This led to tensions in the church, since those families did not like the idea of men like John and Paul meddling in the affairs of their local church. It’s possible that’s what we’ve got going on here, but whether or not that’s the case, John shows that the issue with Diotrephes is fundamentally moral.

Diotrephes is selfish. He loved to be first. He loved his own glory. He did not recognize or submit to the authority of John or the other apostles. It looks like he had either intercepted or disallowed the church to read the letter that John had written because of his disdain for apostolic authority. In v. 10 we see that Diotrephes was actively slandering the apostles. He spoke wicked nonsense about them, and not content with that, he refused to welcome other believers the way Gaius did, and stopped anyone who wanted to show that sort of hospitality by putting them out of the church. In his quest for selfish glory, Diotrephes had made himself an opponent to the truth and he had shown that he loved himself. Whether he realized it or not, in his pride, Diotrephes had made himself an enemy of Christ.

Diotrephes had to be stopped. John has made that clear, but interestingly enough, John doesn’t tell Gaius to stop him. Rather, v. 11, he tells Gaius, “Beloved, do not imitate evil by imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” Diotrephes was so in love with the reflection of his own glory that he had no eyes to see the glory of God. John doesn’t want Gaius to get sucked into Diotrephes’ condition.

I’m sure that if Gaius was aware of the ongoing situation, he may have been wondering if he should use his

authority and his commendability to engage Diotrephes and try to put a stop to things. It's also possible that Gaius was in danger of caving to Diotrephes' influence so that he stopped showing loving hospitality to future missionaries. John instructs Gaius to hold fast to the same truth that has already been commended in him, to imitate Christ by doing the good works of God and to flee the example of Diotrephes who is imitating evil. John encourages Gaius by commending this other brother, Demetrius, who had received a good testimony from the rest of the churches and from John, and who possibly may have been the one who brought this letter to Gaius.

As we consider the difficult situation in which Gaius and this church found themselves in, there are three things I want to bring to your attention:

1) Selfish hearts produce a tangled web of sin. Diotrephes thought very highly of himself and his own wisdom. He liked to put himself first. He saw John and the apostles as a threat, and so he used his influence to oppose them and to lead the church down a path away from Christ. He did not receive the brothers who came their way, and he persecuted those who would have shown godly hospitality to them, kicking them out of the fellowship of the church.

We must not think that we are immune to the trap of selfish love that Diotrephes fell into. They say that power corrupts, but really I think power reveals how attracted we are to self-service. We must exercise a watchful eye on the way that we walk. Commenting on this passage, John Stott notes that, "Diotrephes slandered John, cold-shouldered the

missionaries, and excommunicated loyal believers because he loved himself and wanted to have the pre-eminence. Personal vanity still lies at the root of most dissensions in every local church today."

I don't know what sort of arguments Diotrephes was able to come up with to justify his actions, but I do know that his selfishness caused a great deal of trouble and pain to the Church, locally and abroad. The key to avoiding that pain and that division is to commit ourselves as John instructs to imitating Christ by doing good towards one another, not imitating evil.

2) The second thing I want to call your attention to is the calm restraint that John called Gaius to.

John is clear that Diotrephes' offense against the body of Christ would not go on unchecked. After all, he says that if he comes to the church there, he will bring up what he was doing. John didn't call Gaius to be a one-man army. He called Gaius to resist evil by imitating good. In v. 15 he says, "Peace be to you."

There are many errors and divisions in the Church today, which are deeply, deeply painful and lamentable. As we think about our own responsibility to the truth and to the reputation of Christ, we could easily work ourselves into a frenzy and be set for war. We should never shy away from defending the truth. But I think that as we think about our responsibility to stand for righteousness and to keep the gospel that we've received pure, we must always remember that God has called us to peace in truth and love and joy. Zeal for the

church that loses sight of the peace of Christ isn't commendable.

3) Third thing that I want to bring to your attention comes from the way John ends this letter, "Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name."

I love how personal this letter is, both in how John encouraged Gaius and in how he showed such thoughtfulness for the individual members of Gaius' church. Imagine how encouraging it would have been for Gaius to go to his fellow brothers and sisters in the midst of a pressure cooker situation, and to say to each of them, "John and the friends, say hello to you." Those who walk in the truth and love of the gospel are never alone. Jesus came to die for sin. He has called us his friends, and if we've been joined together with him in faith, we've also been joined together in friendship with one another. Gaius knew John, and I'm sure he knew many members of John's church. The careful regard that John had for Gaius and for those who were with him shines here when John tells Gaius to greet each of the members of his church by name.

It can be easy in times of division or trouble to feel alone. Let us remember in those times that Jesus knows his sheep by name. Beloved, remember: God loves you, and you are not alone. John's final greeting here reminds us that times of trouble are times when the members of the church must draw each other's attention to the peace that is ours in Jesus.

Truth and love are the two themes running through 2 John and 3 John. There's a special relationship between truth and love that brings us true and lasting joy, and as we've seen

this afternoon, these two things are meant to impact the way we live and act towards one another. In a world that's in love with itself, the way Diotrephes was in love with himself, we must live out of a love for Christ, which comes from the truth and which bears fruit of love and care towards one another.