

**Live What You Know:  
Good and Evil in the Church  
3 John 1:9-15**

**Introduction**

John is the last surviving apostle. The others who walked with Jesus and bore witness to His Person and work are home with their Lord. John remains. As did the other apostles, he wrote by the power of the Holy Spirit the words of God testifying to the truth of the gospel. When John makes his exodus, the New Testament Scriptures will be complete, the infallible testimony and application of who Jesus is and what He accomplished.

Before they left for their heavenly home, the apostles chosen by Jesus Himself to be His witnesses, not only established the reliable record of His ministry but also shepherded local churches and the individuals in them in what staying true to Jesus Christ means. The letter of 3 John is such a letter. It is brief, personal, and to the point. At the same time it is profound and insightful, exposing what is evil and promoting what is good.

In the first eight verses John rejoices at the faithful love in the truth of the gospel that his Christian brother Gaius has displayed toward brothers on gospel mission. You might think that at this point of church history, before all the deviations, distortions, additions, and

subtractions of the centuries to follow, that the church of Jesus Christ would be largely free from error and full of good—the kind of good displayed by hospitable Gaius.

*Sometimes we dream of the past with naïve nostalgia and long for the future with naïve optimism, while we recoil from the present reality with all its messy struggles.*

But 3 John and the rest of the NT indicate that there were clear and present dangers then as there are now. There was good and evil. Not just evil outside the church family and good inside it. But as our text this morning clarifies, good and evil in the church itself—at times in places and in people where you would expect to find the greatest good. How do you navigate such confusion, where the treacherous and the true both claim to be followers of Jesus worshiping in the same local body? The apostle John will help us in our text this morning: 3 John 1:9-15.

**9** I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. **10** 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. **11** Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has

not seen God. <sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. <sup>14</sup> I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

<sup>15</sup> Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name.

Key verse: 3 John 1:11

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

This verse has the decisive lightning bolt tone we found in the epistle of 1 John. Straight up honesty. Frank confrontation and clear command.

John is pulling no punches. In the context of describing the evil Diotrephes is practicing, he reminds us that people do what they are. That people who are born of God, who know Him—who've seen Him—actively do good. Those who actively do evil, and this is their pattern, demonstrate that they are not born of God and do not know Him. *The root of an evil life is god-lessness. The root of a good life is god-liness. Connection with God or the lack thereof precipitates good or evil in the church.*

If the first century church that existed before the apostles of Christ had even left the scene was a mixed multitude, how could any church twenty centuries later not be so? Human beings are human, sinners by birth and by choice. Because they are made in the image of God, even those who never trust in Christ, can display good qualities. But sin still taints every part of who they are. Without life from God through Christ there can be no deliverance from the darkness, no lasting transformation of heart and lifestyle. And no chance of being declared righteous before the throne of God by the perfect merits of Jesus that have been transferred to their account.

In every church congregation are persons who have not been born again, along with truly born again believers who at times behave according to the flesh instead of the Spirit indwelling them. When we are away from God, every one of us will behave as the humans we are. But if we are of God and know Him, He will not fail to change our disposition and our ways toward good.

1. What Evil Looks Like (9-10)
2. What Good Looks Like (12-15)

### **1. What Evil Looks Like (9-10)**

<sup>9</sup> I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. <sup>10</sup> 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.

John writes with his characteristic clarity. What Diotrephes is doing is classic evil behavior.

### **Pride**

who likes to put himself first

*Pride is so common to the human condition that we can underestimate how harmful and evil it actually is.* It tends to be easier for us to see in others than in ourselves, but humility would teach us that we are not very good at motive judging.

John helps us diagnose this condition much like a trained doctor can discern what is cancer and what is not.

Diotrephes likes to put himself first. He is self-promoting rather than self-sacrificing. He thinks of himself as the smartest guy in the room, the most deserving of honor and privilege, and his actions are geared toward making himself the most important.

Watch out for those who are always talking about themselves—the first person singular pronouns are their favorite words. Beware of those who consistently make moves calculated to promote themselves among others rather than working to serve others.

*It does not matter how gifted persons may be, or what their credentials are, if their behavior is "me first" behavior, it is evil. There is a disconnect in their walk with God. Either they are believers away from the Lord, or they have never been born again.*

"Personal vanity still lies at the root of most dissensions in every local church today." John Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 228.

## **Resistance**

does not acknowledge our authority.

Here's where the pride makes itself especially clear. John has written the church, but Diotrephes, to put it literally, "does not receive us." John's authority is that of the apostles of the Lord Jesus. As the last surviving apostle, that authority will be preserved in the inspired NT writings of the apostles. Notably, John repeatedly refers to what he has written in his gospel and his epistles. The writing he refers to here seems to be a letter of commendation he would have

sent along with the missionary brothers so that they would be received by the churches they visited and be helped on their way.

Diotrephes is so bold in his defiance of John and what he's written to the church that he does not receive John's authority even while the apostle is still alive. Nor does he receive the brothers associated with John and recommended by him.

*The spirit of resistance to apostolic writings is rife today. It is fashionable to defy what the apostles clearly teach as hateful ignorance and to affirm and celebrate what the apostles clearly forbid as loving enlightenment.*

Let's call such deception and distortion what it is. It is not love for God. It is prideful defiance of God. It is not love for other human beings. It is evil and thus harmful to people.

The serpent tempted Eve first by casting doubt on God's Word, then boldly denying it. He went on to define God's Word as unloving and to argue that the only way for Adam and Eve to be fulfilled was to disobey—not to acknowledge God's authority nor to believe in His goodness toward them.

This naturally leads to the next feature of evil. Self-centeredness and defiance of divine authority necessitates that I demonize those

holding fast to truth in order to justify my own ungodly action.

Proverbs 10:17-18

**17** Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray. **18** The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool.

### **Slander**

So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us.

Diotrephes' words are words of evil—the adjective used to describe the evil one. Diabolical. Satanic. They consist of empty, unjustified charges against John and his fellow workers. He's making it up to justify himself, and John is going to hold him accountable for it: "If I come, I will bring up what he is doing."

"If I come"—those words remind me of how often Jesus Christ says to each of the seven churches "I will come." He walks among the lampstands, that is the churches, who are to give light to the world. He holds His people accountable, and His hand is not shortened that it cannot save or destroy in accord with what He sees.

James, half-brother of Jesus, writes similar encouragement and warning for those suffering mistreatment.

James 5:7-9

<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. <sup>9</sup> Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

Slander and gossip are common in the world, but they can also infest a local church. Some may try to justify such behavior, it is evil. It is harmful. It is satanic—the devil is the slanderer, the accuser of the brethren. And it will be judged. It is best to stop it before it leaves our mouths, and it is good to confront one another when any of us engage in it. (And in our unguarded moments, any of us call fall into sinning this way.) The longer it remains unchecked, the more harm it does. Much of the damage done to churches over the years grew from unchecked words of “wicked nonsense” with little connection to actual truth and with no connection to godly love and humility.

## **Abuse**

he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church

At this point we realize that Diotrephes is not just a church member on the fringes. It appears that he is one of the leaders, possibly one of the pastor/elder/overseers there.

Unlike Gaius, Diotrephes refuses to welcome the traveling brothers on gospel mission. He treats them with the same disrespect he treated John. It is likely, given that John had written the church ahead of time, that Diotrephes' refusal to welcome the brothers was what John means when he writes in verse 9 that Diotrephes does not receive us.

And he punishes those who wanted to receive the brothers by preventing them from doing so and putting them out of the church if they did.

He has redefined good as evil, and evil as good. Then he brings the power of church discipline to bear against those who want to practice good in line with the apostle's directives. This is nothing short of abuse of power.

Evil in the church can start anywhere, but it stands to reason that the more influence a person has, by virtue of gifting, or tenure, or

position, the more far reaching the damage. Anyone in a position of leadership in the workplace or the community, the home or the church, has greater opportunity for good and for evil. Whatever they choose to do is magnified because of the number of people impacted by their choices.

*Sinful ambition drives a person to use position to wield more power in lording over others. Righteous love drives a person to use position to do more good in serving others.*

Position and responsibility do not free us from the common flaws of human character or the continuing battle against our own sin. Every believe has a need for humility, accountability, and help. Even the apostles asked for prayer. Paul, in particular, asks churches to pray for him to make the gospel clear as he ministers—and God chose him to write half the NT!

It is important to keep ourselves accountable to one another no matter what role we may have in the church at any given time. Any one of us can get off track, and everyone of us need others to keep us on track in line with the Scriptures and the Spirit of God.

Pride, resistance, slander, abuse—when you look into the Scriptures, the mirror of the soul, what do you see?

These forms of evil are like cancer. Don't ignore them. They call for corrective action—confession, repentance, reset to healthy behavior. Your brothers and sisters in the church need you healthy. They need you to bring good not evil into the church family.

## **2. What Good Looks Like (12-15)**

<sup>12</sup> 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.

John gives us no specifics about the good testimony of Demetrius, but look what he does reveal.

Demetrius' life pattern is well known. Everyone gives firsthand testimony to it.

Further, his observed lifestyle lines up with the truth of the gospel itself. There is a correspondence between God's Word and his life.

Finally, John himself knows Demetrius well enough to add his own firsthand testimony. And Gaius knows that John's witness is true and therefore utterly reliable.

There is no question about Demetrius. His goodness is well known by those who know

him firsthand. Can those who know you best say the same about you?

One more time John refers to his writing and that there's more to be said, but he prefers to engage in person. John is no secluded theologian with no taste for personal interaction. The truth he writes about shows itself best in direct personal interaction. Human beings need contact with other human beings. Isolation does us harm.

<sup>13</sup> I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. <sup>14</sup> I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

Part of what drives his desire to speak face to face is John's obvious affection for Gaius and other believers.

<sup>15</sup> Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name.

Key words: peace, friends, greet

**Peace**—common Hebrew greeting reflecting John's Jewish roots. Jeremiah 29 gave us the sense of this wish—not just absence of conflict (although that is included) but welfare, well-being. A desire for God's blessing on other people in all aspects of their lives.

**Friends**—related to the word for those who love one another with family affection—brotherly love. People who like being together and express their pleasure in it.

**Greet**—common word; to welcome, embrace; the way close friends and family respond when someone arrives from a journey or is leaving on a journey—hugs, expressions of acceptance and pleasure

By name—not just a general affection for the group, but knowing and caring for the believers individually

This is the kind of goodness God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

You and I bring good into the lives of those around us when our heart desire is for their wellbeing.

You and I bring good into the lives of those around us when we show affection for them as family and close friends.

You and I bring good into the lives of those around us when we welcome and embrace them into our lives.

You and I bring good into the lives of those around us when we know them by name.

This is what we might call “grassroots goodness.” It is tremendously productive, like

the seasons God has put in place, causing rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

“The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.”  
Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

These attitudes and actions toward others in the normal cadences of life bring great good into their lives.

## **Conclusion**

Good and Evil in the Church

### 1. What Evil Looks Like (9-10)

Pride  
Resistance  
Slander  
Abuse

### 2. What Good Looks Like (12-15)

Testimony  
Truth  
Peace  
Friends  
Greet

Closing Song: O Church Arise

Discussion Questions

1. What does knowing that the apostles were already addressing good and evil

in the first-century church tell you about the relevance of their commendations and warnings for us today?

2. How does John's connecting goodness with being born of God and knowing Him help us diagnose and correct the common evils that crop up in our own lives and in the life of the local church?
3. Why is pride such a foundational sin that brings evil into the church and humility such a necessary mindset for genuine believers?
4. What are some common examples today of resistance to the apostles and what they have written?
5. What damaging evils does slander bring into the church?
6. What are the differences between faithful church discipline and abusive exercise of authority in the church?
7. Practically speaking, how does a Christian gain a good testimony from everyone who knows him or her?
8. In what ways does "the truth itself" bear testimony to a person's goodness?
9. What attitudes and actions would words like *peace*, *friends*, *greet*, and *by name* call us to exercise toward one another?