

Who do You Imitate?

3 John

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It was my first day of work in a new job. I was looking for any job during a downturn in the economy. So I took this job and it required working in an office. I'd never worked in an office before. I wondered what it would be like. I was placed under the oversight of a senior employee. He talked the first day about different aspects of the job. But the second day he gave me inside information necessary to survive in this office. He immediately introduced me into the world of office politics.

He said "the manager has his favorites". So my trainer revealed the names of the favorites. Then everyone else in the office had kind of formed an alliance against the manager and the favorites. This was in an office about 15 people. I was invited to be part of the anti-manager alliance. That was apparently the "cool crowd". So there was the manager and his 2 favorites. Then there were the other twelve people who were part of this alliance. Then I learned that within the 12, there was an inner circle of about 8 who did things apart from the support staff.

So I received training on how to do my job. And I was given training on the realities of that office culture. What would I do? Who would I join? Well, this was a 6 month contract. For the next couple of weeks, I watched to determine if this person's perception described the reality of the office culture. It turned out to be pretty accurate. The manager was somewhat oblivious to the disunity on his team. Members of the cool crowd met regularly behind closed doors apparently to talk about work – but more likely to talk about others.

I had a choice to make. Which crowd would be my crowd? At first, I decided to try to bridge the gap. I tried to be friends with everyone. I even spent time in the offices of those who were part of the out crowd trying to get to know them a little. I would get phone calls while in their offices that I was needed in my office. When I got to my office and phone, I found it was simply one of the inspectors faking a call to me so they could rescue me from having to talk to that person that was not in their crowd.

The "cool crowd" had incredible power. They basically ran that office regardless of what the manager did or tried. Being young and new, I didn't really push against them. I reasoned that to get my work done and have good relationships with most of the people in the office I should obey the cool crowd and play by their rules. Before I knew it, I copied them. It felt good to be included on some of the inside conversations. When Christmas approached, the office held a party for everyone. But there was a second office party for the "cool" crowd and their friends. It was flattering to be invited to the "cool" Christmas party.

By the time my six month contract was done, I was thoroughly inside the cool crowd; acting like they acted; talking like they talked and carrying some of the same attitudes they carried. Then I left and began to think about what had just happened. And I began to be ashamed at how easily I had copied what I saw what was necessary to get in a particular circle of people. And as I continued to talk with the Lord about this, I asked Him for strength and wisdom to try not to let this ever happen again. I had copied or imitated a bad example that displeased the Lord.

Yet it can happen so easily. Everyone imitates someone. Children imitate their parents. Young siblings imitate older siblings. We can imitate others in the way we do business; in how they talk at work – the tricks they learn to get ahead; the way to play office politics or to get your way. We can imitate others in what they do with their homes, clothes, hairstyle, relationships and career.

Have you ever stopped to think about who you might be imitating – and why you might be imitating them? Some of you might disagree with the statement that “everyone imitates someone.” You may believe you’re going to carve out an absolutely unique path that no one has ever travelled before. You’re certainly not going to copy your parents or do what the teacher or boss says. Yet by rebelling against whoever we don’t want to imitate, we imitate others who have rebelled against people they don’t want to imitate.

Imitation can be positive or negative. Imitating someone or something positive can provide a rapid and safe way to learn new things without reinventing the wheel. Imitating someone negative can lead us down a path that we never dreamed we’d end up on. Who do you imitate? Why are you imitating them?

There was a Christian in the first century who faced this question named Gaius. He was doing a lot of things right as a leader in a local church. But there was a very powerful personality in that church or at least in that region of churches with the typical Canadian name of Diotrephes. He wanted Gaius to imitate what he was doing. Gaius had some choices to make. Thankfully, he received some wise counsel that would guide him well. We can follow this counsel today in choosing who we imitate.

The counsel comes from a very personal letter in the New Testament written by John to Gaius. This little letter gives us a firsthand view of ministry colleagues dealing with the challenges of church life early on. It was sealed and presented to Gaius alone for first reading. But somehow, it got passed on and spread through the churches so that everyone could learn from it. Today it’s known as the third letter of John near the end of the New Testament just before the book of Revelation and Jude.

We're going to look for John's counsel on who to imitate as we try to reconstruct the story of Gaius and Diotrephes.

3 John 1 English Standard Version (ESV)

¹The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

²Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. ³For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. ⁴I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

⁵Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, ⁶who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. ⁷For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

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

¹¹Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. ¹²Demetrius 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.

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

¹⁵Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name.

John and Gaius seem to be very close friends. John addresses him as "Beloved" four times in this letter. John begins by passing on his prayers for Gaius – namely good health. This was not an uncommon request. In the ancient world, people had shorter life spans. There was marginal medical care. An infection that we can fight off with some medicine or antibiotics could kill you then. So John prays for good health for Gaius in verse 2. Sadly, some have used this verse to justify the prosperity gospel claiming that God wants you to be healthy all the time. And if you're not, there's something wrong with your faith. But this is hardly a prosperity Gospel justification. It's a simple prayer from one church leader to another for good health.

The prayer for good physical health is connected to Gaius' good spiritual health. John notes that he has heard from others that Gaius walks in the truth. We spent much of last week's message talking about what it means to walk in the truth. We looked at the breadth and depth of John's uses of the word of truth. We saw how walking in the truth meant being led by the Holy Spirit of truth; living according to God's ethical or moral commands; recognizing God's sanctifying presence in us; accepting that God reveals things as they really are and accepting the Gospel as truth. Gaius walked in this truth. He was being faithful to the Lord Jesus.

This brought John great joy. Did you notice that in verse 4? “I have no greater joy than to hear my children are walking in the truth.” John has a pastor’s heart. If you want to give joy to your pastor, stay close to Jesus and walk in His ways. If you actually want to give me joy, not torment me, stay true to Him. It is like a punch in the stomach to hear about someone that I once shepherded who no longer keeps the faith. But it is a great source of joy to see people passionate for Jesus Christ.

Well, after blessing and rejoicing over Gaius’ walk with Christ, John commends him for the ministry he’s doing. Remember from 2nd John last week, we saw John warn about false preachers. They went to churches and claimed that Jesus Christ had not come in the flesh. The man Jesus was fully God through His whole life. John warns the churches not to host or welcome teachers who proclaimed this error. But there were some travelling preachers or missionaries who got the message right. They depended on local Christians to provide for them when they visited their city.

Gaius did this faithfully. He welcomed missionaries who were strangers to him. They weren’t his close friends. He put himself out to support them by giving them a place to sleep and food to eat. This was important because these preachers would take no money from the Gentiles – the people they were trying to reach with the Gospel. They didn’t want people to think that they only preached for money. Yet they still needed food and a place to sleep so they could continue on in their ministry. Gaius did this necessary work. In fact, John states in verse 8 that when anyone supports someone like this, they participate in that work. So when we support missionaries we join them as fellow workers for the truth. John compliments Gaius for his faithful work in this area.

But something threatened this work. Or more accurately someone. Diotrephes did not like these traveling preachers. He actively opposed them and refused to welcome them. But he went beyond that. He also stopped others who wanted to welcome them – people like Gaius. Yet that was still not enough for Diotrephes. If he found out that someone had looked after one of these missionaries, he would kick them out of the church. So this Diotrephes dude seemed to have a pretty forceful personality. He was used to getting what he wanted.

Why would he do all this? John has diagnosed the problem. Verse 9 – “I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority”. Not only did he reject traveling preachers and people who tried to help them. He rejected John and Gaius’ authority. He did this because he liked to be first. He didn’t want anyone else to have a higher position than he did. He also spread nonsense about John – negative

talk – wicked talk (V.10). So he (Diotrephes I) actively opposed the advance of the church if it did not involve him at the front of the advance and him getting the credit and power.

Gaius has a decision to make. Will he continue to welcome these traveling missionaries? Or will he cave to Diotrephes' pressure? John addresses this in verse 11. "Beloved do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God." Gaius, don't imitate Diotrephes. Be careful who you imitate. How do you know who to imitate and who not to? Look at their lives. If they do good according to God's standard of good, they're worthy of imitating. If they do evil, even though they may claim to be Christians, then it's questionable whether they really know God.

A person walking in the truth pays close attention to who they imitate.

Diotrephes, who claimed to be a Christian and worked in a church, was doing evil. John warns Gaius not to imitate the one doing evil. But imitate the one doing good according to God's standards.

Are the people you copy and pattern your life after leading you towards God or away from Him? Are they leading you towards good or evil?

Recently, we participated in our oldest daughter's graduation down at the Shaw Center. Now I don't get downtown very often. I don't know how the Shaw Center connects to the different parking lots. We were a little pressed for time to get to the grad banquet. There were people everywhere. We didn't know where we were going so we just started following people who were dressed up and looked like they were going to a banquet. We followed this one group through the parkade and stairwells. Eventually we got to the Shaw Center and they turned off into a banquet. As we looked in there we didn't recognize anyone nor did we see a sign or indication for Courtney's high school. It soon became apparent that there were multiple banquets, events and graduation dinners that night. We had followed or copied the steps of someone going to the wrong place for us. Eventually, we found some going to the right place and arrived where we needed to be.

The same can happen in our lives. We can follow and copy people that we think are headed towards something good. But it ends up to be the wrong place; wrong direction especially from God. But there are others we can follow or imitate that will lead us in good directions. The good news today is that God has provided for us by sending to us others we can imitate for good.

Who has God provided that we can imitate?

First and foremost, **God provided Himself and Jesus for us to imitate.** God reveals Himself to us through the Bible; through creation; through other people and ultimately through Jesus. Ephesians 5:1 – Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. 1 Corinthians 11:1 – Be imitators of me as I am of Christ. We learn about God by reading and going through His Word. We learn about the way Jesus lived by going through the Gospels – the first four writings in the New Testament. We learn about the meaning of Jesus’ life through the rest of the New Testament. We learn about this blood sacrifice of His life for us on the cross. We see the call to receive Him and live lives that respond to this great sacrifice.

God also provides other people for us to imitate. Hebrews 13:7 – Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Philippians 3:17 – Brothers, join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. Philippians 4:9 – What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things and the God of peace will be with you. So think about people God has brought into your life that you would consider walk closely with God. Then watch how they live. Ask how they live and learn from them.

But **God also calls us to live lives that can be imitated.** If you’re a parent here, you have children who will imitate some of how you live. If you have younger brothers or sisters, they will imitate what you do sometimes to the point of annoyance. Elders are charged with being examples to the flock. Young people, you’re called to live lives that can be imitated for good by others. – 1 Timothy 4:12 says “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young. But set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

So imitate Christ. Imitate others who walk with God. Live in a way that others seeking God can find a pattern to copy that will bring them close to God. And if you’ve been imitating someone that leads you away from God – stop. And start imitating someone who does good.

Maybe you have been imitating people who are far from God and you wonder if you can break free from that. Jesus Christ has come to reconcile you to God. If you will trust in Him and His work on the cross, He will come in. He will begin the work in you to change you to become more and more like him. Who have you been imitating? Who will you imitate?