



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## Following after Christ, Part 2

*The Call to Imitate Other Christians*

Previously we transitioned into the heart and soul of 3 John where the apostle exhorts Gaius to be careful as to whom he emulated. At the outset, it might be tempting to say, "We ought to imitate no man; only Christ!"

In one sense this is true. Christ is the embodiment of what we ought to be as redeemed individuals. Peter said, "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example [a copy/pattern] for you to follow in His steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

However, as Christ has ascended into the heavens He no longer is visibly present. YET as He dwells in the heart of man, we therefore are called to follow His example as it is embodied in godly men and women. Paul said, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). The focus was/is Christ. As we behold His example in other people, so ought we to follow! In fact, listen to Paul's words.

1 Corinthians 4:16-17, "I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church."

This is amazing! Paul sent Timothy to the Corinthians that the disciple might tell them how Paul lived as a child of God. Isn't that a little Paul-centered? Not in this case, for the focus wasn't on Paul, but Christ and how His reign and rule was worked out in man. See, we tend to intellectualize Christianity. Now, don't get me wrong, it is good to endeavor to understand truth; yet God knows we need examples.

- What does grace and humility look like when you are wronged?
- What does it mean to place yourself last?
- How do you contend earnestly for the faith without destroying a bruised reed?
- What does it look like to take up your cross and follow the Lord?

We can surmise answers to these questions. But it is much better to observe Christ in these situations. Hence we see our need for examples! Accordingly, everywhere Paul went he taught the importance of following the example of Christ in men! This same truth is exhorted in Hebrews.

Hebrews, 6:11a, 12b, "And we desire that each one of you... [be] imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

This is the calling of God's word! Yet this calling comes with many pitfalls. First, we must not exalt the example of Christ above the teaching of Christ. It is not enough to ask, "What would Jesus do?" and then do it. We must also ask, "What did Jesus teach?" and then submit to it!

Another pitfall is choosing to follow a poor example. Paul warned about this in his letter to the Philippians.

Philippians 3:17-18, "Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* enemies of the cross of Christ."

Paul was very clear: "Be careful who you choose to follow as an example of Christlikeness. Not everyone who professes a love for Christ are worthy of emulation." Hence the Hebrew writer qualified the command with this exhortation:

Hebrews 13:7, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith."

Truly, when it comes to following the example of Christ in other men/women, we must be very careful whom we choose to follow! That is the focus of John in 3 John. Before Gaius were two men who claimed to love Christ and yet whose actions were in complete opposition. Diotrephes, Gaius' pastor, was a self-centered, self-seeking individual whose life and church revolved around him. And Demetrius, a missionary sent out by John and the one who carried 3 John, was unknown to Gaius but was commended to the disciple as one worthy of emulation.

Who ought Gaius to follow? His own pastor? Or a total stranger?

### *Imitate Good*

Gaius, as well as we, must not allow a personal relationship to blur our thinking. According to John, we

must follow only those who exemplify Christ!

3 John 11a, “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.”

Last time looking at Diotrephes we saw the characteristics of an ungodly minister in Christ’s Kingdom. Now don’t miss it, the temptation might be to conclude that since some of the things that characterized Diotrephes are true of us at times — *we’re all like Diotrephes* — we ought therefore to follow no man’s example. Yet to go there not only is to contradict the many passages of Scripture which call us to emulate godly men and women, but it also is to fail to recognize the distinction between sinning and being characterized by sin. Godly men/women sin and repent. Ungodly men/women are characterized by sin. The first ought to be emulated. The latter ought to be avoided. That’s the message of 3 John!

### *An Approved Minister’s Credential: Corporate Recognition*

I want to consider the question from the positive side. Who ought we to emulate? Ones that have the following three credentials.

3 John 12a, “Demetrius has received a *good* testimony from everyone.”

The word for “good testimony” is the Greek μαρτυρέω/*martyreō*, from which we get the English, “martyr.” From its beginning, a martyr was someone who testified in a court of law as to the truth. Later, when Christians were persecuted in Rome and so rounded up, tried (in which they testified on their own behalf), and then executed, the term came to be associated with one who died for a conviction.

Here it is used generally as the judgment of “everyone” concerning Demetrius (who beyond this letter we know nothing about<sup>1</sup>). While the term “everyone” is not qualified in the text, nevertheless there is an implied qualification here. Certainly, Diotrephes wouldn’t have thought much about Demetrius. Nor would any and everyone who *played* at Christianity. Men like Demetrius would be judged a threat; as was Paul and the other apostles.

No! The “everyone” of this text must be a reference to “everyone *who was credible*”- “anyone who could be trusted as a character reference for Demetrius.” As a perfect passive, the implication is that the testimony concerning Demetrius was held by everyone who knew him both in the past and present.

This is the first qualification we look for when it comes to emulating the faith of another individual: when it comes to a potential example, what is the witness of other men and women of God whom we trust?

We need to hear this! How many times has the scenario taken place? One whom we’ve loved, ministered with and to, and with whom we’ve enjoyed deep and abiding fellowship meets an individual who impresses them, captivates them, and so steels their heart. Eventually they introduce their “new friend” to us and we are shocked! The red flags of warning are waving. This is not a good influence. Soon the one we love starts hearing the word of caution and concern, and rather than being sobered,

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<sup>1</sup> He is not to be confused with the Demetrius of Acts 19:23-41 or the Demas of Col. 4:12; 2 Timothy 4:10; Philm. 24. His name was a common one at this time meaning, “belonging to Demeter” the Greek goddess of grain and harvest who was at the center of the annual cultic mystery observances at Eleusis, near Athens.

they respond with incredulity. Before long they conclude that a conspiracy is underfoot, and so contrary to the corporate testimony of one's whom they trust, they follow after their new-found friend.<sup>2</sup>

Now you must believe that this could happen to anyone of us that's how susceptible we are to the beguiling words and actions of a bad example. We see it in Paul's day. Paul asked, "who has bewitched you?" (Galatians 3:1).

At one time the Galatians were running well in Christ (Galatians 5:7). But then came those influential and persuasive Judaizers. As Paul considered how fast the Galatians abandoned fidelity to Christ, the apostle concluded that the brethren had been bewitched! Oh family of God, young men and women seeking a spouse; students of theology who are interested in learning and so prone to listen to the latest preacher/teacher or philosopher; young people going off to college and so being forced to submit to many who are hostile to Christ; your first line of defense when it comes to guarding your heart from following a bad example of Christ is the corporate testimony of the ones you love and respect. Purpose now to heed the advice of those whom you trust. If the testimony is not glowing, wisdom would call you to run from that man/woman/teaching!

### *Credential #2; Character Recognition*

That's the first qualification or credential, now notice the second one; character recognition.

3 John 12b, "Demetrius has received a *good* testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself."

The idea behind this statement is that Demetrius' life adorned the gospel of Christ. Unlike Diotrephes who was characterized- and that's the key here- by

- Selective Submission to the Word of God, v. 9a.
- The Love of Power and Prestige, v. 9b.
- A Tongue given to Slander, v. 10a.
- Opposition to Kingdom Work, v. 10b.
- A Passion for Control, v. 10c.
- The Abuse of Power, v. 10d.

Again these just weren't passing thoughts or temptations. They were observable faults in this man's character! Demetrius' life and lip bore the face and affections of Christ. Yet practically speaking, what did this look like? What sort of person would Gaius have beheld when he gazed at Demetrius? The answer to this is found in 1 John.

Like 2 and 3 John, 1 John was written to warn the church when it came to church leaders. Who is a genuine servant of the Lord and who is not? Yet unlike the latter epistles where the warning is sounded but no content really is given, 1 John gives multiple characteristics as to what constitutes a man or woman of God. It therefore is reasonable to conclude that the man or woman of God pictured in 1 John is the pattern of one "who received a good witness from the truth itself" (3 John 12). Accordingly, we conclude that an encounter with Demetrius would have revealed a servant of Christ who

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<sup>2</sup> Think of Edmund and Turkish Delight.

- Had a deep love for the brethren (1 John 2:7-11; 3:11-18; 4:7-21).
- Far from selective submission to the word, was one who labored to submit to the word in and through all things (1 John 4:1-6).
- Abided in Christ (1 John 2:18-24) and so practiced righteousness (1 John 2:25-29; 3:4-10; 5:1-3).
- Was not characterized by worldliness (1 John 2:15-17).
- Walked in the same manner as Christ (1 John 2:1-6).
- Had his hope fixed on Christ (1 John 3:1-3).
- Not only had overcome the evil one, but had come to the point in his walk where he did not question the goodness of God (1 John 2:12-14), but trusted the character of Christ in and through all things (1 John 3:19-24).
- Had a confidence in Christ, His plans, and His providence such that he knew where he was going and why (1 John 5:13-20).
- Had a deep and abiding faith in Christ (1 John 5:4-10) such that he enjoyed the benefits of salvation (1 John 5:11-12).
- Enjoyed rich fellowship with God (1 John 1:1-4).
- Was wary of any and every form of idolatry (1 John 5:20) such that repentance and faith would have been his daily experience (1 John 1:5-10).

This is one of the keys to being a man of God and so worthy of emulation. Certainly we all sin, just like Diotrephes. Yet that which makes a man worthy of emulation is how he deals with his sin. Diotrephes obviously dismissed it, down played, and so embraced his fallen nature. Demetrius, on the other hand, knew what it meant to be broken, to confess his sin, and so to be cleansed. It was this that

- Drove him in his holiness.
- Lead him to the study of God's word.
- Made him worthy of emulation.

And so to consider Demetrius was to consider a man quite the opposite of Diotrephes (that is clear from 3 John 12). Where,

- Diotrephes was proud, Demetrius was humble.
- Diotrephes was self-driven, Demetrius was driven by the word of Christ.
- Diotrephes looked down on people, Demetrius was a servant who gloried in washing the feet of the saints.
- Diotrephes opposed the Kingdom, Demetrius supported it.
- Diotrephes was a man who boasted in great things, Demetrius embodied the heart of a disciple and so professed his own brokenness and his need for the cleansing blood of Christ.

Family of God, this is not all people in the body of Christ. Yet when it comes to those whom you and I ought to emulate these are the only ones who are qualified. David put it this way:

Psalm 101:6b, "He who walks in a blameless way [the Hebrew reads, "in the way of integrity"] is the one who will minister to me."

David wasn't after great and impressive words or deeds, just the actions of a man who was humbled before God and so knew both the glory of the Lord and their own brokenness. And that ultimately is

what qualifies a man or woman for emulation in the body of Christ. Yes they must be “above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:1) and so not CHARACTERIZED by what is seen in Diotrephes.

But you must see that there are two ways that holy habits and conduct are generated:

- They can be attained by the will of the flesh (Phariseeism).
- They can be evoked by knowledge of the grace of God (Biblical Holiness).

This ultimately is what is behind our passage and the “receiving of a good testimony... from the truth.” And so when it comes to identifying ones whom we ought to emulate we look for the Corporate recognition of ones who we trust, the character recognition of a life of faith, humility, brokenness, and holiness and then lastly ecclesiastical recognition.

### *Credential #3: Ecclesiastical Recognition*

3 John 12c, “and we also bear witness, and you know that our witness is true.”

This was John’s final qualification when it came to the one whom Gaius ought to follow: Demetrius received the commendation of the leadership of a true church.

- Diotrephes couldn’t boast of this. If he could, then John’s words here would have been meaningless.
- The implication is that unlike Diotrephes who took the office by will, Demetrius was set apart unto the ministry by “the laying on of hands by the presbytery” (1 Timothy 4:14).

This means something. The Presbyterian system of governing is rather simple. As we do not trust any one man, we believe that God works His will for a local body through a parity and plurality of elders. Thus there may come a time when I individually do not agree with the leadership of a local body, nevertheless I conclude that God’s will was made known through the body and so I submit (provided the decision does not violate scripture). Likewise that Demetrius was recognized by the local body of Christ in which John ministered as a man worthy of emulation means something!

Now ecclesiastical recognition is not the bottom line; we want all three when it comes to those whom we emulate. Nevertheless it is an important qualification which today is so often discarded.

And so, find someone outside of the body of Christ who is a potential pattern of Christ, in other words, one who has both corporate and character recognition, and though they may look and sound good, nevertheless I remain wary if they have forsaken the body of Christ. The man or woman who does not have Ecclesiastical Recognition is not qualified to be a minister of my heart and neither is he/she qualified to be a minister of yours.

Practically speaking what does this look like? Simply, before we latch on to the example of a man/woman in Christ we want to know what the church is saying about them? If I cannot get a good evaluation from trusted pastors, I ought to be wary. Now before we leave, there is a word of encouragement that John gave Gaius as he was confronted with the persecution that came from following Christ. Not only should he be careful NOT to compromise his own fidelity on account of the source of his persecution; his own pastor and church, but he must consider what such a persecution

meant when it came to ministry.

### *The Consolation*

3 John 11b, “the one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.”

Based on the context of this verse, the obvious referents here are Demetrius and Diotrephes. By virtue of his passion to serve the Lord and his brokenness/humility, Demetrius demonstrated the vivifying work of the Holy Spirit. In contrast, by virtue of his wicked manner and wicked ways, Diotrephes testified to a heart that did not know Christ. I. Howard Marshall wrote this:

“By contrast, a person who does evil- such as Diotrephes- has not seen God. He has no real Christian experience, and his conversion must be judged to have been an illusion.”<sup>3</sup>

John is being that strong here. Not “seeing God” is paired with not “knowing God” in 1 John 3:6. The two are synonymous. Hence we derive the ultimate cause of Diotrephes’ ungodly service and so his persecution of Gaius: He Wasn’t Saved!

Now don’t let this trip you up. John did not conclude this about Diotrephes on account of one or two of the characteristics involved. Again, we are all going to struggle at times with the sins mentioned here. Rather John saw all of this as a package and so it was the fruit which testified to a heart that did not know the Lord.

Well what good was it for John to inform Gaius that Diotrephes probably wasn’t saved?

The same good it did in the life of Timothy when Paul said as much concerning some in the church to which he was called to minister. As a younger pastor, Timothy was confronted with some big issues which undoubtedly tore him apart. His preaching... his manner... his ministry all were under attack. Now again when such occurs in the life of a Christian, the inclination is to conclude that there must be something wrong with you.

- Why would God’s people be so contrary?
- Why would they oppose the preaching of the word so vehemently?

Timothy probably concluded, “*certainly, I must be doing something wrong!*”<sup>4</sup> However Paul had a different answer:

2 Timothy 2:20, “Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor.”

*Timothy you are being persecuted NOT because you are doing things wrong, BUT because the body to which you are ministering is filled with non Christians! So don’t shrink back! Rejoice that you are being persecuted for righteousness sake.*

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<sup>3</sup> *The Epistles of John*, NICNT, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> If you’ve ever thought this you are in good company. Samuel struggled here as well (1 Sam. 8).

Such was the message John gave to Gaius as he wrapped up his treatment on whom Gaius ought NOT to emulate. And such is the message God gives to us. You are going to have examples after which you will pattern your walk. That's healthy. Yet let us be careful as to whom we choose to follow.

At the outset, let us refuse the example of one who does not adorn the gospel by their life- regardless of how good they may look or sound. Rather let us consider the fruit of the minister, the testimony of the church, and the testimony of the leadership! Yet even here we're dealing with a flawed system on account of the fact that sinners are involved!

Accordingly mistakes are going to be made and some who ought to be commended will not be. And some who are commended ought not to be. When that happens and we find ourselves "burned" by a church leader

- We must not be floored, disillusioned, or ruined, AND...
- We must not be diverted from following Christ!

Rather, we must conclude that the persecution or failings of a servant of the Lord, a Biblical hero, is the result either of their reprobation OR their serving in the flesh. Either way it ought not to shake our faith. For listen, the goal of all emulation is the knowledge, service, and exaltation of Christ! Man will always let us down. Such cannot be said of Christ! So may our focus ever and always be as we follow Christ as He is embodied in others!

### **About Bethel Presbyterian Church**

*The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word* is published regularly. It is distributed via the internet.

### **VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO**

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon (the last few minutes were not recorded because of a power outage during the sermon) and these notes can be found at [Faithful Leadership](#). The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

### **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on August 2, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.