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**John 3, verse 11, English Standard Version.**

*<sup>11</sup> Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.*

**Do not imitate evil.**

3 John is shortest book in the Bible, in terms of the number of words. 3 John, unlike 1 John and 2 John is a personal letter, and not written to a congregation. Tradition says that the Apostle John wrote the Gospel and all three of the John letters – but few scholars believe this. We don't even know if the three John letters have the same author. So, we accept the letter for what it is – an intriguing glimpse of very early Christian life, written by a church leader who simply calls himself “The Elder”. The letter is addressed to someone named Gaius, whom the author says he loves. There are three other men named Gaius in the New Testament, and there is a well-known Bishop with this name who lived around this time, but in truth, we have no idea who this Gaius is. The author begins with a typical introduction of a letter for the time, wishing Gaius good health and a pure soul, and acknowledging Gaius' reputation as a believer “*walking in the truth*”. Then The Elder gets down to business by complimenting Gaius:

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

Most scholars believe that the author, The Elder, had sent leaders of the mother church to Gaius' local church to solve some sort of problem. Where Gaius' church was, we do not know. These leaders, who were previously unknown to Gaius, were apparently well received. Gaius clearly showed loyalty to the Church and a sound understanding of emerging Christian theology, in other words, the teachings of Jesus. He apparently hosted the visitors graciously. Later, Gaius helped them with their efforts to go evangelize non-believers, so-called "Gentiles".

But now comes the apparent reason the letter was written. There is someone else in Gaius' church, named Diotrephes, who has not been acting in the same spirit of Christian love and hospitality as Gaius, and in fact, Diotrephes does not treat others as equals, and most critically, isn't accepting the authority of the author of the letter, The Elder. The author is so concerned he writes this:

*<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.*

The Elder is apparently planning a trip to Gaius' church because Diotrephes is "talking wicked nonsense" against The Elder, and apparently Gaius, as well.

Diotrephes also did not welcome the teachers sent by The Elder. And he forced out of his church some people who did welcome the visitors. Diotrephes seems to be building his own faction within his church, denying the authority of The Elder, trying to fill the ranks of his church with people who accept the authority of Diotrephes, and not behaving with grace toward travelers who have come to help build the larger Church. There is a theory that this letter represents not an isolated incident, but a broad problem confronting the larger Church, something that would eventually impact the organization of the Church greatly. I will get back to this.

The Elder now wraps up the heart of the letter by affirming Gaius again:

*<sup>11</sup> 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.*

The Elder reinforces his own teachings by advising Gaius to “*not imitate evil*”, but to “*imitate good*”. The Elder notes that Demetrius has had the same teaching and opportunities that Gaius has had but has perhaps responded by imitating evil. We are not told what it is that The Elder and Gaius believe, and Diotrephes does not believe. We know that The Elder’s authority has been challenged, and it seems that there are also underlying theological differences – but we are not told anything about the details of these conflicts. This is probably a letter that was not sent in isolation. It is not known if 1 John and/or 2 John represent letters written by The

Elder before this letter, or if The Elder's previous correspondence is completely lost. If this letter follows from 1 John and 2 John, then we have an idea of the nature of what is bothering The Elder. 1 John and 2 John mention issues relating to living a life of love, following the teachings of Jesus, and never worshipping idols. We don't have much in the way of specific details. But for us today, it's interesting to look at 3 John as it stands, as an isolated letter, out of context of any other letters.

We note that the letter ends with a statement strongly suggesting that The Elder is going to make a trip to Gaius' church to try to straighten things out:

*<sup>12</sup> Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.*

*<sup>13</sup> The children of your elect sister greet you.*

Here is what scholars have noted about this letter and what makes the letter so intriguing to me. In 3 John, we see that even very early in the history of the Church conflict arose along two spectrums: the authority of clergy and church staff, and Christian theology. 3 John makes it clear that people were jockeying for positions of authority, for control of the teachings of the emerging Church. Scholars have suggested that this is what eventually led to the emergence of the papacy in Rome. A strong, centralized authority was seen as the only way to unite a Church riddled with discontent, competition, and conflicting interpretations of Jesus' teachings. And clearly, there were those who sought only to use the Church

as a source of personal power. We know that the Catholic Church itself would later split between east and west, and eventually, the Protestant Reformation would break the Church into innumerable denominations and sects. A preview of all of this is seen in this first century letter, the shortest book of the New Testament.

This is something that impacts and haunts us today, within many Christian denominations. We have had tremendous turmoil in the Christian community in the U.S. in recent decades. I believe that every minute spent arguing or engaging in any sort of conflict is a minute that has not been dedicated to God.

As a hospital chaplain I deal with death. Many lives end abruptly. Others end after months or years of confronting some disease. Often the most uplifting thing a chaplain can do after a death is listen to family members tell the story of the person who has passed away. The stories are not always perfect, and occasionally they are quite grim. I have had parents tell me about their adult children who have suffered from alcoholism or drug abuse and have finally succumbed to their addiction. These same parents often tell me about how different their child was when they were very young, how innocent, happy and kind they were. When someone loses a spouse or a parent, I tend to hear the good side of someone's life. I always affirm the love that people show for the family member who has died. Some of the most beautiful stories I hear are about people who truly

lived their faith. Not all of them have been Christian. But a component of all the faiths of which I am aware, if the beliefs and practices are honored in the way they are meant to be, is a notion of caring for others. I have heard about many people who have offered love, peace, empathy, kindness, generosity, and forgiveness to those around them. I am certain they have all lived very imperfect lives. But God made all of us imperfect, and our job as humans made in the image of God is to rise as high as we can above those imperfections - and shine.

When I re-read 3 John as I was preparing this message, it struck me how long ago the people mentioned in that letter died. Two thousand years. The Elder, Gaius, and Diotrephes, have been memorialized via a letter about conflict over the teachings of God and God's Church. Perhaps the Elder was able to visit this unknown church and bring harmony to its congregation. Maybe Diotrephes let go of his ego. Whatever bizarre teachings he was pushing on others, perhaps he came to realize his mistake and went back to the basics of Jesus' message. What I don't know is how the work and the conflicts of these three people impacted others around them and then impacted the descendants of those people. We all need to be aware of how our actions can have impacts for many generations.

That is what I occasionally wonder when I hear the stories of people who have passed. What did they leave behind them that had an impact on the spiritual

lives of those around them and the people who followed in later generations. We all end up dead. As believers, we have a choice. We can be The Elder, working hard to spread the Word of God, despite the ignorant or deliberately harmful teachings of others. Or we can be Gaius, living the life of a true, empathetic believer and impacting those around us in more subtle but better ways. We can be Diotrephes, forcing our will on others simply to make ourselves feel powerful and teaching things that we, in our hearts know are harmful. So many Americans, so many people in this world aspire to be Diotrephes. And many Christians today are in that group. That is why the conflict we see in the world is often mirrored in the Church.

I spoke with someone recently who thought about death every morning. He was not sick. This was not in the hospital. It was someone whom I had known years ago but I had lost contact with him. In truth, I didn't have good memories of him. He was a Christian but was always at conflict with people in his church and in his life in general, including me. I worked with him and so I couldn't avoid him. He sent me email after years of no contact, asking if we could talk on the phone. He said that a couple of years ago he had put a Bible verse over his bed. He had it matted and framed. He read it aloud every morning. It had inspired him to not only change the way he behaved in life, but to try to make things right with people from his past. The quote, from his New International Version, is Proverbs 15:18 –

*<sup>18</sup> A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict,  
but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.*

I wasn't familiar with this one, but I instantly loved it. The Hebrew literally says "*the one who is slow to be wrathful*" or "*the one who is slow to anger*" – and that is what some more accurate translations do say. But I like the fact that "slow to anger" is translated as "patient" in the NIV - because that is what angry people often are, impatient. Patience and a reluctance to be angry seem often to come together. That was the problem with my co-worker, at least long ago. He was impatient, needed things to happen fast, and had to have everything go his way. I do believe that Diotrephes might not have been disagreeing with The Elder over theological or organizational issues that truly mattered to Diotrephes. Diotrephes might have been arguing for the sake of arguing because he was one of those short tempered, impatient people who became frustrated very easily – and then turned to anger because he had nothing else to offer in his defense.

I think this is what damages a lot of individual churches and what damages the Church as a whole. People decide something and when others disagree, they don't have the patience to stop, accept that they are not going to get their way instantly, and then see what in truth is truly the best solution for everyone.

Maybe The Elder made his way to the church of which Diotrephes and Gaius were

members. Perhaps the Elder was enough of a calm person, with a presence that engendered trust, and he was able to bring the members of that local church together under sound theology and a proper power structure.

In the intervening years my old associate, my friend now, had changed. People can change. We do change. As he got older and death became something more real to him, he realized that it wasn't worth doing harm in the world to appease his impatience, to satisfy his anger. That is indeed the reason he gave me for giving me a call: while he had the time, he was making sure that he did his best to straighten things out with people from his past. He knew that he could die at any time, anyone could, and he wanted people to know that he was no longer hot-tempered. He said that he listens now. He appreciates people who think differently than him. He doesn't always have to have his way. I asked him how things were going in his church. He said that there had been a lot of conflict, that some people loved their pastor, and some people hated her, and he, of all people, was the one doing his best to hold the congregation together. At that we both laughed. Please pray with me.

*God, bring harmony to our church. Bring peace, collaboration, and joy to the Church as a whole. Inspire us and guide us as we strive to be the vehicle by which all contention, all anger, all impatience in the world vanishes.*