

## ***“Imitation”***

3 John 9-15

Delivered during the COVID-19 crisis via Livestream at Central Baptist Church on August 30, 2020

### **INTRODUCTION**

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Eureka! Eureka was the word that defined an entire generation in the mid 1800's. In English it means, ***“I found it.”***
  - It all started in southern California when James Marshall and some others were flushing water through a tunnel in order to build a sawmill. As Marshall was examining the water that had been flushed out he saw that it contained shiny flecks of gold. Marshall ran up to a certain Mr. Scott and said,
    - ***“I have found it.” “What is it?” inquired Scott. “Gold,” I answered. “Oh no,” returned Scott, “that can’t be.” I replied positively,--“I know it to be nothing else.”***<sup>1</sup>
- That moment led to the greatest mass movement of people in the Western Hemisphere up to that point in history.
  - By 1850 over 115,000 people had arrived in California by land or sea. Every one of them had a dream to yell that one word, ***“Eureka!”***
- But prospectors quickly learned that not all that glitters is gold. There is such thing as ***“fool’s gold”*** or iron pyrite. But how does one determine pyrite from real gold when to the naked eye they look the same?
  - Answer: you apply the metal to some tests. One test of course involved biting the rock. Real gold is softer than the human tooth, while fool’s gold is hard. A broken tooth meant that a prospector needed to keep digging.
    - The point is simple: not all that glitters is gold and therefore tests need to be applied to determine if it was genuine or fake.<sup>2</sup>
- Jesus warned that not all who call themselves Christians are the real thing. He said, ***“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”*** He went on to say, ***“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.”***
  - Jesus brought these words up because he knows the influence that other people can have on us. We all imitate others. This is not a bad thing as long as people are leading us toward Jesus. But there are people who at first appearance seem to be Christians who are not. Jesus told us to watch out for such people. Be careful who you imitate. This raises an obvious question: how do we distinguish the true from the false?
    - Just as the prospectors had tests to determine if gold was real, here in 3 John 9-14 we have an imitation test. A test to discern who and what you should imitate and who and what you should not.
- So I am going to break today’s message into three parts.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://malakoff.com/marshall.htm>

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Fool’s Gold*, 19-20.

- First, understanding the imitation test. Second, illustrating the imitation test. John illustrates the test with the negative example of Diotrephes and with the positive example of Demetrius. Finally, we will apply the test. So understanding, illustrating, and applying.

## UNDERSTANDING THE IMITATION TEST

- Our first heading then is **(SHOW SLIDE 2) Understanding the imitation test.**
  - The test is given in verse 11. **(SHOW SLIDE 3) READ 11a - <sup>11</sup> Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good.** The Greek word here for *“imitate”* is *“memeomai”* from which we get our word, “mimick.”
    - In this verse we see that it is right and good to mimick, or to imitate, the good we see in those who truly love Jesus.
- Some Christians think this unspiritual. They say, *“I don’t imitate people. I imitate Jesus.”* Well of course. 1 John 2:6 says to *“walk as Jesus did.”* But don’t get more spiritual than the Bible because **(SHOW SLIDE 4) the Bible calls us to imitate God and people.**
  - Paul says to the Corinthians, **(SHOW SLIDE 5) “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”** Hebrews 13:7 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 6) “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”**
    - We are to imitate God and other people.
- But I think you can see that we are to be discerning in who and what we imitate. There is a test to be given. We are to imitate what is good and not what is evil.
  - John now goes on in verse 11 to say why it is so important that you apply this test to whom and what you imitate.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 7) We must be careful whom we imitate because a person’s behaviour reveals their true spiritual condition.** Look again at verse 11.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 8) <sup>11</sup> Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.** Notice that John says there are some people who are true Christians. They are *“from God.”* They are born of him. They are his children. But there are those who, despite their great claims, have *“not seen God.”*
    - So how do you distinguish between them? What is the test of true authentic Christianity – whether in yourself or in others whom you should imitate? Before I give you the answer consider a few areas that do not prove it either way.
- First, right beliefs. Although a true Christian will believe the right things, this does not mean that all people who believe rightly are Christians. As James says even the demons believe that there is only one God.
  - In the same way, although a true Christian may have great spiritual experiences, spiritual experiences do not mean a person is truly a Christian. The same crowds that experienced Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and shouted *“hosanna”* also shouted *“crucify him!”*

- So correct belief and great spiritual experiences are not sure signs that a person really is a Christian.
- So if these are not sure signs of a true Christian then what is? **(SHOW SLIDE 9) The chief mark of a Christian—and therefore the chief mark we should look for in those whom we imitate—is consistent godly behavior in doing what is good.** Look at verse 11 again.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 10) “Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.”** This refers to continual and ongoing practice. All through the Bible, the chief mark of true faith, of faith that should be imitated, is continual practice in doing what God commands.
- The chief evidence that you are truly a Christian, is that your life produces fruit. Now hear this clearly: your behaviour does not save you. It is the chief evidence you are saved. We are saved by grace. You cannot work for your salvation. You can only receive it as a gift. But the chief evidence that God has saved you is a changed life.
  - That this is true is also proved in the fact that the final judgement is a judgement of works. Has that every seemed strange to you? If it is all about Jesus why are we judged according to our works?
    - Because works are the chief evidence of true saving faith.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 11)** Think of the thief on the cross. This man sinned for 40 years of his life. Now he is on death’s door. But the Spirit of God moves on him. He cries out to Jesus for mercy. Jesus does not say, **“Sorry but it is too late to make up for you bad deeds with good ones.”** Jesus says, **“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”** This is such good news. Salvation is a free gift.
  - But this thief will one day stand before the judgement seat of God along with you and I and every person who has ever lived.
- We read that at the final judgement there is a Book and there are books. The Book is called the Lamb’s Book of Life. In it are all the names of those whom Jesus purchased back to God. The thief’s name will be read on that day.
  - But what is the proof that he really is saved? This is where the books come in. They are the record of every part of your life. On that day the thief’s book will be brought forward. Thousands of pages will be reviewed. Every page will reveal that this man lived his life without any regard for God. But wait, on the very last page, just before the end of the book, there is one small paragraph. Perhaps it reads, **“heart was broken over sin,” “recognized his need for a Saviour,” “called on Jesus for salvation,” and “lovingly exhorted his fellow criminal toward God.”**
    - Having read this God will rip the page from the book and hold it up before the billions of angels and the billions of people gathered around the throne. And God will say, **“Here is the evidence. Here is the evidence that this man is my true son. He is real and this is the proof.”**
- You see the chief sign that you are really a Christian is that your life is changed. You are not perfect but there is consistent evidence of a life that is seeking to obey God in all things.

- So let me bring this all together. John brings all this up to emphasize how we must be so careful about whom we imitate. It is so important that we discern whom we will imitate and we do this by looking for people who have chosen consistent godly behavior over time.
- Before moving on let us examine our own hearts. What does the evidence of your life say? Are you walking in the truth? Are you walking towards God or away from Him? The issue is the general tenor and bent of your life.
  - Ask yourself, ***“Do I hate sin? Do I long to be like Christ? Do I strive for this? Do my actions reflect that I am striving to be like Jesus?”***

### ILLUSTRATING THE IMITATION TEST

- Now that we understand the imitation test, John gives us some real-life examples so we can work this out. In the second place, let’s look at **(SHOW SLIDE 12) illustrating the imitation test.**
  - Remember that John writes this letter to a man named Gaius. John wants to warn Gaius against imitating the actions of a man named Diotrephes and to encourage him to imitate a man named Demetrius.
    - So let’s look first at the negative example of Diotrephes.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) READ 9 - <sup>9</sup>I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.** So John wrote a letter to this church that Diotrephes and Gaius were a part of but Diotrephes completely rejected John and his authority over the church – ***“does not acknowledge our authority.”*** We’ve got a fight brewing.
  - What was the problem with Diotrephes? It does not seem that he was a false teacher because John does not say anything about his doctrine. As we will see the problem here was an abuse of power. Diotrephes was a powerful and influential man who had to control everything in the church. It is this man that John does not want Gaius imitating.
    - How can you identify such a person so as not to imitate them? By applying the test. John gives a few ways you can spot a church dictator.

### JOHN’S CONDEMNATION OF DIOTREPHESES

- **(SHOW SLIDE 14) First, you can spot church dictators who are not worthy of imitation because they are the kind of person who always has to be the boss.**
  - **READ 9 - <sup>9</sup>I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.**
    - Jesus is all for strong influential leadership but never in a way that is prideful and lords it over others.
  - So we are not to imitate this kind of leadership. True leaders lead as Jesus did – with strength, tenderness, servant hearts, and love.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 15) Second, you can spot church dictators who are not worthy of imitation because other godly leaders identify them as problem people.**
  - **READ 10a - <sup>10</sup>So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing.** Whoa. If I was Diotrephes I might start thinking twice about my life. This is John. John the

apostle. John, the son of thunder. John who wrote major chunks of the Bible. And John says if he is able to come he will bring attention to this.

- This is a full on western showdown. John is going to walk into town with his spurs and six guns. You can hear the western music has started playing. John is not afraid to name names. He tells Gaius to watch out for and not to imitate this man.

➤ **(SHOW SLIDE 16) Third, you can spot church dictators who are not worthy of imitation because they slander other church leaders.**

- **READ 10a - <sup>10</sup> So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us.**
- Whenever someone wants power in the church this is how they do it. They start a whispering campaign. The whispers happen at small group, praying meetings, and on email. Like Absalom undermined King David the whispers simply hint to others that the present leadership is not efficient. They hint that they could do things better.
  - Speaking from painful experience, please be very careful when people start talking negatively about your church leadership. We are not above making mistakes. But check your facts with us, realize that you only have part of the story, before imitating such people and passing on their gossip.

➤ **(SHOW SLIDE 17) Finally, you can spot church dictators who are not worthy of imitation because they abuse power and people.**

- **READ 10 - <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.**
  - You remember from last week that John had sent travelling missionaries to this church but since Diotrephes rejected John he rejected these missionaries. But he went even further. He would not even allow these missionaries lodging when they had nowhere else to stay. When other church members tried to take the missionaries into their homes he phoned them up and ordered them not to. And then when some of these church members did not listen to him he had them excommunicated.
    - You can spot a Diotrephes by their abuse of power and people.

➤ **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 18) So there is an example of the kind of person we are not to imitate. This is so relevant to our day. One of the main reasons people give for why they want nothing to do with Jesus is because Christians are hypocrites. Many times the hypocrisy they are speaking of is an abuse of power. They point to Catholic priests abusing boys, the Crusades, gay bashing from the pulpit, or just power-hungry pastors. To my friends who are in that situation this passage has some important things to say.**

- First, realize that not all who call themselves Christians are true Christians. John gives the illustration of Diotrephes and then immediately after says such people have not seen God.

- So that is a plea to you to realize that just because a person is in leadership or even a pastor or priest does not mean that they are even a Christian.
- Second, John is entirely in agreement with you in denouncing hypocrisy. He does not try to gloss over Diotrephes' issues. He does not justify it with some spiritual platitude. He condemns it in no uncertain terms.
- But third, I want you to see that John does not give up on Jesus just because one man is a hypocrite. Neither does he tell Gaius to give up. Listen, Christian hypocrisy does not disprove the truth about Jesus anymore than a chain-smoking doctor disproves the truth about medicine. I would plead with you to make the distinction between Jesus, who is against hypocrisy and the abuse of power and those who say they love Jesus but disprove it by their actions.

### JOHN'S COMMENDATION OF DEMETRIUS

- So that is who and what we are *not* supposed to imitate. But now let us look at the positive. Verse 11 says we are to imitate who and what is good. I cannot express how important this is. We all need godly examples.
  - One of the turning points in my life came at the end of grade 11 when our family moved from Calgary to Kamloops. In Calgary I wanted to live for Jesus but had no real Christian friends. I found myself imitating all the wrong people and really not following Christ. But in Kamloops I had a few solid Christian friends. Watching how they lived out their Christianity as teenagers changed me forever.
    - I am sure that every one of you can testify to the impact that other Christians have made on you – how to this day you imitate them.
  - So how can you spot a true Christian who is worthy of imitation? In verse 12 John illustrates the test with the positive example of a man named Demetrius. Here we see at least three ways you can spot someone who *is* worthy of imitation.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 19) First, you can spot Christians who are worthy of imitation because they have a good reputation.**
  - **READ 12 – <sup>12</sup>Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone.** Demetrius' life was such an example that everyone spoke well of him.
    - You can of course learn to imitate people in an informal manner but let me also encourage you to be very intentional about this. Look for people at your stage of life, or in your line of work, who are worthy of imitation. Ask if you can meet them regularly to talk through how to honour Jesus in your area.
      - If you are a mom get together with other mom's who are worthy of imitation. If a businessperson then find a godly businessperson. Look for those who have a good reputation.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 20) Second, you can spot Christians who are worthy of imitation because their lives are consistent with the truth.**
  - **READ 12 – <sup>12</sup>Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself.**

- The truth he professed was lived out in his life.
  - Many of you have probably heard of the John Stott, the world famous pastor and author. In 2005 *TIME* magazine ranked him among the 100 most influential people in the world. David Wells, another famous author, lived with John Stott in London for a number of years. He gave a great tribute to Stott when he said, ***“John Stott is what he is in public what he is in private. He is the same man.”*** What a tribute. His Christianity is not an act that he puts on. He walks in the truth.
    - That is the kind of person to imitate.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 21)** Third, you can spot Christians worthy of imitation because godly church leaders commend them.
  - **READ 12c** - <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.

#### APPLYING THE IMITATION TEST

- So there you have some clear illustrations of the imitation test. As we close now **(SHOW SLIDE 22)** applying the imitation test. Who are you imitating? Are they striving for Jesus?
  - Look around you and find people like this.
- But don't just look for people to imitate; be a person who is worthy of imitation.
  - Paul's exhortation to Timothy is true for all of us: **(SHOW SLIDE 23)** ***“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.”***
    - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 24)** Does the way you talk line up with Jesus? Does your life line up with Jesus? Are you seeking to love others in tangible ways like Jesus? Are you trusting God for every area of life? Are you living a pure life, particularly in your sexuality? What change do you need to make today? Set an example.
      - <sup>11</sup>***Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.***