

Christians • 3 John 9–13

Do you think it is ever fair to compare one Christian to another? Is it ever fair to say that one Christian is better or worse than other Christians?

No doubt there's a part of us that wants to shout out, "Absolutely no!" After all, did not Jesus say, "Judge not, that you be not judged"? Does that then mean that is it not inappropriate that we ever judge another Christian?

It does, however, raise for us the question of whether we can ever say that a Christian is wrong. Because, if we were to, in any way, indict anyone for any misbehavior or bad judgment or poor character, would we not then be judging?

Well, let's consider this. The quotation from Jesus, "Judge not", has to be one of the most misunderstood and clearly one of the misquoted and misapplied verses in the Bible. For it does not refer to judgment in the sense of discernment or in the sense of wisdom and decisions that have to be made, but refers rather to judgment in the sense of condemnation. We as Christians have no right to condemn someone else. That is God's responsibility and only his.

However, the Bible clearly teaches that we are to make judgments in the sense of wise decisions, or discernment, and the examples are many. We have to make judgments on who to marry and who not to marry. We have to make judgments on who to believe and who not to believe. We have to make judgments on who is sinning and who is not sinning and who may teach and a thousand other issues.

As far as comparing Christians to one another, the simple answer is that the Bible itself compares Christians with one another, and that, therefore, gives us permission to do so as well.

Listen to Third John verses 9 through 13 where we find a comparison of contrasting Christians. There the apostle says:

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loved to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone - and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is

true.

I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon and we will talk face to face.

Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

The key verse and the central message is verse 11. There it says, "do not imitate what is evil but what is good." And then old John does a fascinating thing. He gives the specific names of two individuals, and he contrasts them. He contrasts them specifically for imitation purposes. So which one are we going to listen to; which one are we going to follow?

The first of the contrasts is a man named Diotrephes. He's described in verses 9 through 11, and he is presented as evil or as a negative example. A whole list of characteristics of him is given.

First on that list is that he loved to be number one, to be first. Diotrephes had a serious spiritual problem. It was one that damaged his own life and had its consequences in the lives of other people. It significantly damaged the church as well. His problem was that he had to be first. He had to be heard. He had to be the one who decided. He had to have his own way. Diotrephes had to be the boss; he had to be Number One.

The fact is that such self-centeredness is sub-Christian. For Christians are those who follow Jesus

Christ, of whom we are told "that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor." Jesus, who is described by saying, "he came, not to be served, but to serve." Jesus, who set the precedent and the example by doing

something culturally unthinkable, he washed the feet of his disciples.

But maybe most powerful of all is that which is described in a piece of the Bible that is known by the Greek word *kinosis* which means emptying, because that's what he did. We are told in Philippians 2: 5-7:

Your attitude (as Christians) should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

That's what Jesus was like, and Diotrephes was nothing like him at all. Diotrephes was extraordinarily different. He was the kind of man who had to always be up front. He was the one who had to be first in line. He was the one who wanted to be acknowledged and honored by others; it was important to him

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that his name be recognized. He was anxious to get the credit. He had to be the big shot.

But he's further described as saying that one of his characteristics, probably related to his desire to be number one, is that he separated himself from the apostle John. Like a lot of people who want to be number one, Diotrephes wouldn't have anything to do with the competition. Strangely, he perceived the apostle John himself to be the competition. John writes that he "will have nothing to do with us." In other words, Diotrephes completely separated himself from this father of the faith. He had no conversation with him. He would have no communication with him, no fellowship.

I tried to figure out why this would be the case. It's hard to figure out from what the Bible tells us. But it's not hard when you compare it with people and their relationships today. I think I can guess at it. My guess is that Diotrephes thought that John was too conservative. He was an old man who was stuck in the old ways of doing things.

Or, maybe the opposite was true. He indicted him for being too liberal. Perhaps he thought John had left the ways he used to be and did not follow the paths that originally he had followed.

Perhaps he said that John was too controversial. Or perhaps he said he would not face the issues. Whatever it was that he indicted old John for, I'm sure it sounded great. At least to him, and at least to some of his followers it had a ring to it that at least somewhat sounded true. Good sounding reasons. For it seems that people who wear Diotrephes' cloak usually sound pretty good, and sometimes what they say is surprisingly credible.

But we need to be objective enough to recognize who he was talking about. He was saying that he would have absolutely nothing to do with Jesus' best friend. He would have nothing to do with one of the original disciples, the only one that by then was still alive. A man who, with his own hand, had authored five books of the New Testament: the gospel of John, the three epistles and the book of Revelation. As prolific and significant a biblical author as Paul, perhaps even more so. An apostle of Jesus Christ, a man who represented to the Christian world at that time what a Christian was all about. And Diotrephes would have nothing to do with him, wouldn't even talk to the man.

In sort of a crude fashion you might say that it would be like a Republican having nothing to do with the name of George W. Bush, and not being willing to meet him if he had the opportunity. It just doesn't make sense, being a Christian and having nothing to do with the apostle John!

How far did he go? Well, let me guess again here for a moment at how far he may have stretched things. John says something interesting in verse 9. He says, "I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us."

"I wrote to the church." What is he talking about?

He's not talking about the gospel of John because that is not a letter that was specifically written to the church; it was written to the world at large, and especially to non-Christians. He's not talking about the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, which was addressed to seven churches in the Roman provinces of Asia, because at the time that these words were written that hadn't been written yet. He's not talking about I John or II John because they simply could not be identified as going to the same recipients.

Our guess, and the guess for a long time of students of these things, is that the letter that is here referred to is one that somehow has been lost in the last two thousand years. It is apparently a letter that was written to the church where Diotrephes was a member. Perhaps he may have even been a leader within that church. But beyond that we know nothing more than John's cross reference to it here where he says that he wrote to the church.

So, it disappeared. It's gone. And we begin to guess what happened to it. Perhaps a good guess is that Diotrephes may have destroyed it. The letter was written, and as an apparent leader of that church, he would have nothing to do with John and, as a result, probably then nothing to do with anything that John had written. Therefore, it is because of the spiritual problem with Diotrephes that we do not have a fourth epistle from John as part of our Bible today.

He is described as loving to be Number One. He was separated from the apostle. And then this awful list goes on to say that Diotrephes gossiped "maliciously about us." He deliberately spoke mean and evil things about John and about his colleagues. The word that we have in this English translation of the Bible as gossiping literally means teaching nonsense. So what Diotrephes was saying was nonsense. It was completely stupid; it was untrue; it was ridiculous. And yet, amazingly, there were people who listened, who gave credence to what he had said.

Even today there are people who believe others who speak nonsense simply because they speak. Maybe it's because we like them. Maybe they have a forcefulness about them, or maybe it's because they are particularly articulate. They may be absolutely malicious in what they say. They may not make any sense at all, and yet there are those who believe.

That is especially tragic within the context of the church. Sometimes it is because of compassionate Christians, people who, out of Christian generosity, will carefully listen and, even though they hear nonsense, will agree in order to be nice. Or they agree just because the person who speaks is someone that they have known for a long time. Whatever the reason, Diotrephes did it all. He gossiped maliciously, he spoke nonsense and he had a following.

Fourth, he is described as one who refused to welcome not only John but others as well. John explains that he refuses to welcome the brothers. He excluded not only the apostle, but he wouldn't have

anything to do with anyone who would have anything to do with John. This would be kind of funny if it weren't so pathetic. It would be kind of funny if it weren't practiced today.

There are Christians today who practice what they call second and third degree separation. You may have heard that expression before; you understand what that means. For others, that's a new idea. By this is meant that people say that because they are Christians they will have nothing to do with someone who is evil or someone who has a wrong view, a wrong doctrine or teaching. They are separated from them.

But then they carry it a step further saying that they will not have anything to do with anyone who has anything to do with someone who does evil or speaks that which is false or has a doctrine with which they disagree.

Some people will even take it to a third level. They won't have anything to do with anyone who has anything to do with anyone who has anything to do with anyone who believes anything that is wrong or that disagrees with them.

This past summer I had a lengthy conversation with someone who is part of a church where only the King James Version of the Bible may be used. They will not have anything to do with anyone who uses other than the King James Version of the Bible. As a result, there has been a separation of fellowship with people who otherwise have been good Christian friends.

Sometimes it's a matter of belonging to the right denomination or having the same beliefs concerning charismatic gifts or mode of baptism or divorce or abortion, and on and on the list goes. And so there are those who say, "I won't have anything to do with anyone who has anything to do with someone who disagrees or associates with those who disagree with me."

While all that may be well meaning, it can also be very sad for those who are followers of Jesus Christ who himself was especially criticized because of the people with whom he associated. People who disagreed with him; people who thought that he was incorrect in what he taught; people who accused him of all kinds of evil things. Yet he would find himself, by choice, in the homes of these people. He would talk with them and associate with them until his religious critics said that he was wrong because of the associations

that he made. Some people I know argue this with style and with polish, but it also is nonsense. It was then, and it is now. It was characteristic of Diotrephes.

A fifth and final characteristic of him that John lists is not very complimentary either, and that is that he controlled and excommunicated other church members. I perceive that he had a lot of power in his church.

He was something of a dictator. John said, "He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church." In other words, Diotrephes instructed members of his church about whom they could associate with and whom they could not associate with. And if they broke his instructions, he excommunicated them. He even excommunicated people because they had an association with John who wrote part of the New Testament.

Diotrephes was crazy, but other Christians listened to him, and that is scary. They went along with him. They even obeyed him. In that I find a very powerful warning that we never let anyone have that much power and that much influence within any church. There can be no such leaders unless there are gullible followers who allow someone like Diotrephes to do what Diotrephes did. They needed to understand, as we need to understand, that the church of Jesus Christ does not belong to Diotrephes or to any pastor or elder or any influential leader. The church of Jesus Christ belongs to Jesus Christ. No one has the right, ever, to insist upon being Number One in the church.

Colossians 1:18 is very clear in saying that Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone is Number One. He is supreme. He has the preeminence. And anyone who seeks to be elevated by self or by others to that position has come into competition with Jesus Christ, which is a place no Christian ever ought to be.

All of this, I know, may raise the question of whether this man named Diotrephes was even a Christian at all, and I guess I have some doubts. But I do know that what happened then is not particularly uncommon now. There are churches that have been destroyed or are being destroyed by the Diotrephes types within the world. It is people like Diotrephes whom John had in mind when he wrote verse 11. "Do not imitate what is evil."

But as negative an example as Diotrephes was, Demetrius in verses 11 and 12 was an extraordinarily positive example. Demetrius apparently belonged to the same church as Diotrephes, which I'm sure made for some difficulty and conflict in itself. But it's there that the similarities end.

Demetrius was a wonderful Christian, a great example. He was spoken well of by everyone. So you could talk to people in the context of the church, and not just the church that he belonged to but other

churches where John had contact, and they all said he was tremendous. He was what a Christian ought to be. He lived it out.

It wasn't just the Christians who thought well of Demetrius, either. You could talk to non-Christians in those days as well, people who were familiar with him through living in the same neighborhood or perhaps

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through doing business with him, and they would say the same thing. Everyone spoke well of him.

John even adds his own letter of reference in verse 12 when he says, “We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.” So John was willing to stake his own reputation by saying how good a person and how good an example Demetrius was.

Yet John recognized something that we all recognize, and that is subjectivity. For lots of people can say that someone is wonderful, and they can all be wrong. Important people can say that someone is great. Important people can be wrong, as well.

So John moves very carefully from that which is subjective to that which is objective. He adds that Demetrius lived by the truth. Now notice carefully how objective he is being here. He says that Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone and even by the truth itself.

John was a stickler for the truth. If you’ve read I John, for example, you know the big deal he makes out of the truth. And he usually says THE truth, using an absolute standard in talking about Christian doctrine and about the scripture. He raises the standard of God’s word very, very high, and he speaks of it repeatedly in specific and measurable terms that are clear. And he now says that by those specific and measurable and clear standards you may judge Demetrius, and you will find that he comes out great. That even the truth itself shouts out in affirmation of this man called Demetrius.

Of course, that’s not to say he was perfect, for he was a sinner. However, over a long period of time he demonstrated that he was faithful to Jesus Christ. He demonstrated what he believed, and he lived what he believed. And what he believed and lived was right. Therefore, John would say, he was the kind of example worth imitating.

John had both of these men, Diotrophes and Demetrius, in mind when he wrote verse 11. “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.”

The Greek word that he uses here for imitate is the word *mimos*, somewhat similar sounding to our English word *mimic*. Some people may think it’s inappropriate to imitate anyone but Jesus Christ, but that’s not so. The reality is that we’re all imitators.

When I was in grade school my father sponsored a Syrian national to come to the United States. His name was Esper Ajaj. The first week Esper was in the United States he came to our home for dinner. We ate in the dining room, and my mother used her best china and lace tablecloth. After dinner, we had a dessert with a special topping. Two of my brothers decided that this should be saved to the last. So, using their spoons, they very carefully cut off the topping, moved it over and put it down on the plate. They then proceeded to eat the dessert and saved the best to last.

Here’s this poor guy from Syria who’s never seen

anything that looked like this before, and he watched. Then he took his spoon and very carefully lifted off the topping and put it over to the side on his plate. He didn’t know what else to do so he imitated, because that’s what people do.

And Christians imitate other Christians, too. We see other people at church and we look at the way they are dressed and we listen to the way they talk. We get to know other Christians and we pray the way they pray, we read the Bible as they read the Bible, we give as they give or we don’t give as they don’t give. And because God recognizes all of this, he does not forbid us to imitate others. But he does caution us to be very careful in picking the ones we’re going to imitate.

Another quotation from the New Testament is what Paul wrote in Philippians 3:17. He said, “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.” In other words, imitate, but make sure that you imitate the right person.

As we conclude our study, let me try to sum up at least this final paragraph as practically as possible. Understand that these verses are not a warning to people like Diotrophes to shape up and don’t try to be Number One, don’t have to have the preeminence over everybody else. The reason John isn’t saying that is because they wouldn’t listen. That’s the point he makes. Diotrophes wouldn’t pay any attention then, and people don’t pay much attention today either. The Diotrophes people, regardless of time or place, seldom listen. They’re bad news people. They’ve done lots of damage to lots of churches and to lots of Christians.

These words are written to us so that we will pick carefully those we’re going to imitate. They’re reminders to look around in our church and our community and in our world and try to find a Demetrius or two. Someone who is spoken well of by Christians and non-Christians alike. Someone who lives out what the Bible teaches. Someone who measures up to the objective standards we find in the Bible.

And then John tells us down through the centuries that when you find yourself a Demetrius, go ahead and follow. Go ahead and imitate.

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