

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, June 21, 2015**

**IMITATING THE GOOD**

**3 John 1-15**

I'd like to begin by saying something that until very recently would have been considered utterly safe and uncontroversial. Olympic Gold Medal Winner Bruce Jenner is a male. He has always been a male. He will always be a male. No amount of plastic surgery or sophisticated photographer's lighting can change that. Now, as I said, that used to be a statement that would garner 100% agreement. Even if he himself might disagree with that, all other people looking at him would have said of course, chromosomes, biology don't lie. Now, in a moment when our culture seems to have gone insane there are many who would like to treat what I have just said as hate speech and ostracize from polite society anyone who would say it out loud. Brothers and sisters, we live in a time in which elite culture and increasingly popular culture as well has come unhinged from reality and morality. Men can now be women and wrong can now be right. In times like these, facing an increasingly hostile culture that demands submissions to standards that reject God and His revelation, we are called to stand for what is true and we are called to act in genuine love. In short, we are called to the imitation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is John's message, or at least the most important part of his message, in this third letter.

He begins this letter in the same way that he begins 2 John. He identifies himself as "the elder," the *presbyteros*. As I mentioned last week, it's good to know that at least one of the Apostles was a Presbyterian and God love him for it. As with the lady and her children, he addresses this to a particular, in this case a very particular individual, man named Gaius. And he addresses him, we are told in verse 1, in the truth. He loves him in the truth. Now we know nothing about this man Gaius. We know nothing about him except that he may have been a member of the same church as the other man who is mentioned later in this letter, named Diotrephes. We'll get to him later. But we also know that he is loved in the truth and the repetition of that phrase from 2 John 1 indicates that it's not simply a throw-away line. It's an expression of something that is important to John. He loves the lady and her children, whether that be an individual woman and her family or a church and its members, he loves them in the truth. He loves Gaius in the truth. And the reason he says that is because it is by virtue of the truth of Christ and in light of the truth of Christ that he knows them at all. By that I don't mean that he wouldn't otherwise have ever met these people if they hadn't both become Christians. What I mean by that is that the way that we genuinely know one another is if we are bound together in Christ. Later on in this letter he speaks of strangers. We'll say more about that when we come to it. But truly, for the most part, people in this world are strangers. And yet, despite that, we can know a good deal about one another if we are all in the truth together.

This morning in my Sunday School class I used one of the members as an example. We can know something about that person – as a matter of fact we can know a good deal

about that person – because we know her in the truth. We know for instance that she’s a sinner, just like the rest of us. We know for instance that she is loved by God, as are all of His creatures. We know that she’s called to Christian faith, as are all of God’s creatures, even if not all effectually called. All receive the call. We know that she’s made in the image and likeness of God and as such is a person of invaluable worth. We don’t need to know her life history. We don’t need to know her ancestry. We don’t need to know what her tax returns say. We don’t need to know where she works. But we know that because we know her in the truth. And we can say that about every person who is in Christ here and everywhere across the planet, which is to say there are hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people about whom any one of us could say, “We know you and love you in the truth.” That’s a marvelous reality that we have in Christ.

Well, this is a very personal letter. And John demonstrates that in verses 2-8. In verse 2 he begins by wishing Gaius good health. That’s a perfectly reasonable thing to do. We might do that ourselves if we’re writing to somebody, if we call them on the phone, if we message them on the Internet. We might ask how they’re doing and one of the things we’d be implying is that we hope they are doing good physically and are in good health. But he goes beyond that and says, “I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you even as your soul is getting along well.” Even as your soul is getting along well. Now is he suggesting that all is rosy with the world and there are no problems? No, he’s not saying that. Later on in the letter he makes clear that there are problems, in fact, and maybe problems that have something specifically to do with Gaius. I can’t imagine any other reason he’d write to him about them. And it’s also the case with us. If I say that all is well with my soul I don’t mean that I have no problems. I have problems. I’m a troubled person. Would you like to hear about my troubles? Not right now? Okay. That’s cold, Richard, really cold. I was all prepared to bare my soul and what do I get? “Not now.” Okay, you can come by later and I’ll tell you all my troubles. The truth of the matter is no one knows the troubles I’ve seen.

We live in a troubled world. We live in a fallen world. I opened with an example of that fallenness. A disconnect within one of our fellow creatures. A sad disconnect between body and mind and spirit. What’s even sadder is that that’s applauded like it’s a perfectly okay thing instead of a condition of fallenness that if possible, medically, should be treated and if not, certainly be prayed for. The folks down in Charleston know the troubles of this world. And how! That wasn’t just murder. It was indeed, whether it’s legally such or not, we don’t need to get into that, all the evidence is that this was a hate crime. He hated those people simply for who they were. Simply because of the color of their skin. He might have walked into this sanctuary this morning, rather than driven down to Charleston, and picked out a half dozen of our members and said, “You people have to die.” It’s a scary thing. We live in a troubled world, and yet we can still say, “All is well with my soul.”

I’m sure Gaius, though we don’t know with any specificity, experienced the fallenness of the world. He may have well experienced persecution by the Romans. He lived in a time when Christians were certainly mistreated in a variety of ways, persecuted for their faith. And yet John says that he hopes his body is well, “even as your soul is getting along

well.” He doesn’t say anything further and I’m sure that the two of them knew what he was talking about. He meant inasmuch as he rested in Christ, inasmuch as he found his joy in Christ, inasmuch as he had peace in Christ, inasmuch as he was in the truth of Christ, all was well with his soul no matter what swirled around him. If you heard any of the testimonies – that’s what they were – of the Christians who were left behind by the murders in Charleston this week you’ll know what I’m talking about. There was one young man in particular, his name is Chris Singleton, a college sophomore I think, whose mother was one of those who was killed. I saw a part of the meeting he had with the media on Friday. I was astounded! Astounded at the way he was able to speak of his faith and of his mother’s faith, of their praying together, of their life together. She hadn’t been dead for 48 hours yet, murdered in cold blood by a hater, and yet this young man was able to give a testimony to his faith to the media before him and through them to countless people across America. It was an amazing thing. I would be surprised if it’s not on You-tube. Remarkable young man. Not even 21 and yet with the composure to stand before cameras and tell them how his faith was getting him and the other people whose family members were victims, how it was getting them through these days. That’s where Gaius is.

Well, John goes on and he thanks God for Gaius and he says, “It gives me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth.” Even with the world bearing down on him he still remains faithful. And John says in verse 4, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” Think about that. What do we hear typically from parents these days? “I have no greater joy than that my son has become a doctor.” Of course, they’re all Jewish. Ever heard a Gentile mother say that? I guess they do, but Jewish mothers say that all the time. “My son the doctor. My son the lawyer. I have so much joy that my children are living in a good town and that their kids have good schools. They’ve given me grandchildren. This is all wonderful. I’m glad that they’re successful. They’re moving up in their company. They’re blessed with wealth.” There are a hundred things, a thousand things that parents will rejoice over for their children. And what is it that John rejoices over? That his children, those who he had disciplined or those whom he had been used by God to bring to faith, that they are walking in the truth, that they are holding fast to what they know is true. That’s his greatest joy.

Then he holds him up in terms of his hospitality. Remember last week we talked about the need for truth to walk in love? When he says that he’s walking in the truth, the walking, the action part is where love really takes hold. And the way that he commends Gaius for that is in terms of his hospitality. “Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers even though they are strangers to you. Even though, in worldly terms, these are men you know nothing about. You’ve never met them. All you have is my word with regard to them. And yet you opened your home to them. You have offered them hospitality.” Gaius, John is saying, makes no distinction between those whom he knows in the flesh and strangers. If they are brethren they are welcome, and that’s a sign of his faithfulness to the truth. “You are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers.” And so it is, in verse 6, we are told that when they return to John and to his church they were full of praise for Gaius. They thanked God for him. They told the

church about his love. There are few ways better than to open one's home and to offer hospitality that demonstrates one's love. How many of you have ever had visiting missionaries stay in your home? We've got at least a few folks. You are folks who are in the position of Gaius. You are the people whom John is specifically speaking to today. The men that Gaius opened his home to were, in fact, missionaries. We know that because we are told that they had been sent. They had been sent for the sake of the Name – verse 7. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out. These were men who went forth in Christ's name to do His mission. In the same way that our Brooklyn team is going this week, they went out from another church to another place and they had work to do for the kingdom. And Gaius in the process opens his home to them and that is what he's commended for. That's something that any of us can do. And the interesting thing here, I think, in some ways, in verse 7, is that it was for the sake of the Name that they went out and they received no help from the pagans. The world didn't help them. The run-of-the-mill people in the community probably wouldn't have anything to do with them. They found out that they were missionaries, that they were Christians, and immediately shut their doors to them. And in our day that's what happens as well. The world more and more wants to shut the door in the faces of people who go forth in the truth. And the form of that shutting the door may differ from place to place. It may take the form of refusing to listen when you speak. It may take the form of trying to get you to leave town if you're not wanted. But whatever the form may take, lack of hospitality on the part of the world is still something that we cope with and that throws us back on the resources that God's given us.

Well, hospitality here is not just a sign that we're living in the truth. It's also a way of furthering it. We ought to open our homes to those who minister. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth. It gives us a unique opportunity to work together. Having a place of safety and a place of welcome is important when we're doing work that's going to engender hostility on the part of some.

With all that in mind, it's kind of jarring, then, to come to verse 9, because as positive, as joyful, as effusive as this letter has been, not everything is well where Gaius is. "I wrote to the church, (presumably the church in which Gaius finds himself, wherever that might be) but Diotrephes who loves to be first will have nothing to do with us." The way I read that is he wrote to this church and this man Diotrephes wouldn't even read the letter. You should know that all of the letters in the New Testament – Paul's, John's, Peter's – if they were written to a particular church they would have been read in the church. That's where the practice of reading such things as papal encyclicals in church came from. The early churches read the letters of the Apostles when they received them. There's a good reason for that of course. Many, perhaps even most of the people in any given church couldn't read, so they would have to hear it instead of reading it themselves. They couldn't simply pass it around the pews so the people could all take a look at it for themselves. Instead they would read it aloud so that everybody could participate. Diotrephes had intercepted a letter, or gotten his hands on a letter, that John had sent to this church and he refused to read it. He kept it from his brethren.

Diotrephes is a picture of spiritual leadership that has gone wrong. We're told that he loves to be first. He is kind of like the mother of James and John who wanted her sons to sit on Christ's right and left hand in the kingdom of God. She wanted them elevated above all the others, above, in fact, any other Christians, insisting on them being served rather than serving. Once again, in that regard, good Jewish mother, but not exactly demonstrative of a Christ-like attitude. Diotrephes is like that, loves to be first. John says, "He will have nothing to do with us." Which doesn't just mean that he wouldn't read the letter. It meant that he didn't want to be accountable. He didn't want anybody looking over his shoulder. He didn't want anyone prying into his business. He didn't want to let anyone else know what he was doing, a sure sign that he was up to no good because, quite frankly, evil or wrongdoing prefers to work in the dark. We're told further, in verse 10, that he is gossiping maliciously. To further his goals he tells lies, he tells half-lies, he tells truths out of context in order to undermine John and his relationship with those in Diotrephes' church. We're told that he refuses to welcome the brothers. He, unlike Gaius, refused to take in the missionaries whom John had sent out, even though they were fellow Christians, assuming that Diotrephes was a Christian. Even though they were fellow Christians he refused to welcome them because of the feud that he had with the man who had sent them. And that again is a sure sign that one is working against the gospel.

We're told finally that he stops those who want to do so and he puts them out of the church. What we have here is a picture of a pastor, perhaps, or at least a church leader, who is so controlling that he will not allow his fellow Christians to act as Christians. They want to do what Christians do. They want to walk, act in love, in the truth with brothers and sisters of the faith and he won't let them do that. Reminds me of some pastors of our own day that I've heard of who will cast people out of congregations if they are engaged in stuff that's not formally approved, if they're undertaking a ministry, for instance, that hasn't gone in front of the pastor and gotten his stamp of approval. Or if they're teaching something that the pastor just, no matter how idiosyncratic it might be or however trivial it might be, says no, you can't do that here. The proper path, after he lays all this out, in terms of what Diotrephes is doing, in contrast is to imitate what is good. Verse 11, "Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good." He puts it that way because all people have the choice. They may live godly lives or they may live satanic ones. He's saying there's nothing original under the sun, and we know that's true. The writer of Ecclesiastes said there is nothing new under the sun and, in fact, there isn't. Everything pretty much that we've ever done, somebody else has done. And everything that we do has been called good or evil by God. And we know good and evil because God and Satan embody them. So whether we do good or do evil, it's because we're imitating one or the other. Does that make sense? We don't just make up our own code of morality. We don't make up what it means to walk in love. God's told us what it means to walk in love. If we ignore that, we reject Him, John is saying. If we walk in it, we embrace it.

He further emphasizes this point by saying, "Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God." That's sounds really "works righteousness," doesn't it? Anyone who does good. Well, we have to understand what he

means by good and evil. He doesn't mean those as free-floating, abstract moral concepts. He means those in terms of imitation. Do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. Anyone who does good is imitating good. How do we know what good is? Because God has told us and God has shown us. He has shown us in Christ. So when John calls us to imitate the good and when he says that anyone who does good is from God, what he means is, those who do good do good because they are enabled to do so by the Holy Spirit who acts within Christians to enable us to conform to the image of Christ. We don't do this simply on our own, simply because we feel like it or because we think it's a good thing to do. We do it because God works within us to do it. Please don't misunderstand me. This doesn't mean that non-Christians can't act in ways that we define as good. Non-Christians can certainly do a host of things that I am delighted that they do. The point here is that, as Isaiah put it in Isaiah 64:6, the righteousness that they would bring before God on their own is as filthy rags because it is by its nature painted by sin, because it doesn't originate in God. For the Christian, John says, it does.

This week we've seen evil at work and we've also seen good at work. We've seen faithfulness and trust. We've seen love and forgiveness. We've seen hate, we've seen murder, violence, prejudice. In both instances what we've seen is imitation. One person was imitating Satan. I'm not saying that he's satanic or that he was possessed or anything like that. But he was imitating the father of lies. There were some other folks, the people that he killed, the people that they left behind, who imitated Christ. No starker difference can be found anywhere in this world. And that's what walking in the truth is all about.