

A Mile Wide and an Inch Deep

3 John 11-12

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

The contemporary Christian church can often be described as being a mile wide and an inch deep. Its circulation is vast, yet its influence is minimal. Human nature reveals that we are followers, imitators, of others. This is the very nature of how children learn to walk, talk, and learn; they listen to and watch how their parents operate. God doesn't want us to stop the practice of imitating, but rather to think carefully about who we are following. The Bible makes it clear that a believer should watch, learn from, and imitate those who follow Christ.

Discussion Points:

Third John 11 gives us a mandate to obey – ***“Do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.”***

- What are the implications of this command?
- How does the practice of imitation relate to our relationship with God?
- Why don't good works save you? Yet why are good works essential?

“He who walks with the wise will be wise, but a companion of fools will suffer harm.” (Proverbs 13:20).

- How does this verse relate to the verse above (3 John 11)?
- Why is it important to be selective about those who you walk with?
- What are some of the potential benefits to choosing wise friends? What are some of the potential pitfalls to walking with a fool, someone who says, “There is no God”?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Testimony is a legal term in the court of law, and John repeats this word several times in reference to Demetrius. Demetrius' Christian testimony proved reliable, was full of integrity, and was supported with accountability, thus making him John's example of someone worth imitating.

- What would others say about your testimony? Would others say you have a reputation for doing the right thing – why or why not?
- If Truth was a person and could testify about you, how would he describe your character? Does your character match with your reputation – why or why not?
- Are you worth imitating? In what areas could others follow you as you follow Christ?

Gospel Connection:

Jesus lived a perfect life on earth, giving us a sinless testimony that we can imitate. He lived this testimony so selflessly that he gave his life for sinners as a means of salvation and eternal life with God. We can find no better example to follow than our Lord Jesus, and as a result of following Him be a person others can imitate, as well.

Practical implications:

Think: Am I being faithful in choosing wisely those I follow? Am I practicing and living out my faith in a way that will be a good example for those who might follow me?

Pray: Praise Jesus, my wisest example and blessed savior! Ask God to give me wisdom in choosing those worthy of following and also to be an example worthy to follow.

Do: Demonstrate a life that shows the world His likeness.

A Mile Wide and an Inch Deep

3 John 11-12

An American journalist introduced a phrase in 1889 that we still use to this day to describe someone or something that is superficial or trivial or unimportant. The phrase is, “a mile wide and an inch deep.” The journalist was actually describing the Platte River out in the Midwest. And although it is an important part of the Missouri River Watershed, it was disqualified from use as a major navigation route because of its lack of depth.

This journalist recorded – and I quote – “The river has a large circulation, but very little influence. It covers a great deal of ground, but it is not deep. In some places, it is a mile wide and three-quarters of an inch deep.” And so the phrase was born. And to this day, this phrase is never used as a compliment.ⁱ

His description struck me – and I couldn’t help but think of the average Christian and the average church today – we can have large circulation out there in the world, but very little influence.

We run the risk of being a mile wide and an inch deep.

According to God’s word, part of the problem – and part of the solution – is directly related to the practice of imitation.

Human beings are, by nature, followers . . . and expert imitators. A child will learn how to talk and how to walk by watching and listening . . . by imitation.

That’s why you talk the way you talk . . . you sound just like your mother or father.

Then again, that used to really bother me up until the time I turned 15 – I was a late bloomer – it used to make me so mad when I answered the phone, and the other person would say, “Hello Mrs. Davey.”

So I’d lower my voice and try not to sound like her.

Early on in the history of Israelite exodus, the Lord warned His people through Moses with this interesting command in Exodus

23 where God said, “**You shall not follow the masses . . .**” In other words, you shall not imitate the unbelieving crowd.

Solomon delivered an interesting guarantee in this principle of imitation when he recorded, “**He who walks with the wise will be wise, but a companion of fools will suffer harm.**” (*Proverbs 13:20*).

You hang around wise people and they’re going to rub off on you – iron sharpening iron.

You hang around fools and you suffer harm – you pay the penalty.

Remember, according to the Bible, being a fool has nothing to do with your IQ or your SAT scores or how far you got in college before they kicked you out – a fool in the Bible, is someone who has **said in his heart, there is no God (Psalm 14:1)**. In other words, he lives his life independently of – and in rebellion to – Creator God.

And if you follow after people who defy God, you’re heading down the wrong path.

I think of that often when I stop to put gas in my pickup truck – which is 5 times a week. The gas pump has like a video screen built into it. And as soon as I swipe my card, it kicks on with what’s trending . . . the top movie, the top song, the top video game. I mean, this is what everybody’s talking about . . . this is what’s trending – you’ve got to stand there for 3 minutes and listen . . . and there’s no off button – I’ve looked . . . you got to listen to the exact opposite of anything you would ever want to follow . . . it’s the opposite direction you would ever want to take . . .

Talk about a mile wide and an inch deep.

The problem is, the masses are chasing after it. And this is part of the problem . . . human beings tend to follow one another.

We are imitators by nature – which means we must choose wisely.ⁱⁱ

In fact, the Bible uses the concept of imitation negatively, but also positively.

- Paul will tell the church in Philippi to follow his example (*Philippians 3:17*);
- he will tell the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ (*1 Corinthians 11:1*);
- the writer of Hebrews tells the believer to be imitators of those who demonstrate patience (*Hebrews 6:12*);
- later on he writes that we should imitate the faith of our spiritual leaders who taught us the word (*Hebrews 13:7*);
- Paul will even tell the church in Thessalonica to imitate other churches in the way they handled suffering (*1 Thessalonians 2:14*).

God never tells the believer to stop the practice of imitation; but He does tell us to stop – and think about – the example we’re following.

Now the Apostle John has just described the wrong example for us to follow in Third John.

His name was Diotrophes – John introduced us to this proud, unaccountable, power-hungry, inhospitable, unteachable, defiant, unkind church leader who was leading his church in the wrong direction.

And if you’ll turn back to Third John, he now tells Gaius, the recipient of this letter – that there is another man in their assembly – and he is worth imitating.

But before he introduces us to Demetrius – the good example – notice that John actually delivers to us a mandate to practice the art of imitation – *verse 11* – just the first part.

A Mandate to Obey

Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good (3 John 11a).

The construction of this command implies that you are not to imitate an evil person or evil conduct, but imitate a good person or good conduct.ⁱⁱⁱ

God never says, stop imitating. Just make sure what’s trending is worth imitating – that it’s truly good and not sinful or even superficial.

And then John broadens his command with this description – ***notice verse 11 again:***

The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God (3 John 11b).

The one who does good and ***the one who does evil*** are referring to two kinds of patterns in life – this is someone’s practice.

John is describing someone who desires and pursues and practices good as opposed to the one who desires and pursues and practices evil.

Notice, ***the one who does good***, John adds, ***is of God***. This is typical language for the Apostle John; he uses this kind of language to refer to people who are ***of the devil*** (*John 8:44*); people who are ***of the world*** (*John 15:19*).

To be ***of God***, or ***of the devil***, or ***of the world*** – is an expression that describes a bond – a family relationship.

Which means that someone who loves and practices sinful conduct is effectively revealing their bond with the devil, but the person who loves and practices conduct that is wholesome and good is revealing their bond with God.

The one who does good is of God – that is, he is demonstrating a family bond and a family likeness.

Now don’t misunderstand; you don’t do good things so you can be saved . . . unsaved people can do good things. John isn’t suggesting that you’re automatically saved if you imitate good conduct.

Paul wrote to the Galatian church:

A man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law (Galatians 2:16).

You don’t do good things so you can go to heaven, you do good things because you are going to heaven . . . you’re just demonstrating that your Father and your family home is up there.

John Calvin said it well when he wrote that we are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone - John Calvin (1509-1564).

A believer is motivated to do good works to demonstrate his family relationship so that others *will glorify their Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:16)*.

The believer is imperfect in doing good, but he keeps practicing this art of imitating that which is good, for the glory of God.

Notice one more observation – John writes at *the end of verse 11* that:

The one who does (or practices) evil has never seen God (3 John 11c).

You would expect him to finish this thought by saying, “and the one who does evil is not of God.”

But instead, he changes it to read, “They have never seen God.”

Which is confusing because no one has seen God in all His glory . . . so what’s he talking about?

This expression of *seeing God* is a major theme in John’s writing and seeing God is the same thing as knowing God.^{iv}

Seeing God is the tantamount to believing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The classic conversation took place between Jesus and His disciples, and Jesus is teaching them about His oneness with the Father – and then Philip interrupts him, which I’m so glad he did, because, Philip said exactly what we’d all say too; Jesus says,

If you had known Me, you would have known my Father also; from now on, you do know him and have seen Him.

Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” (John 14:8).

In other words, “Lord, what do you mean we’ve seen the Father; I don’t see the Father . . . do any of you guys see the Father . . . Lord, show Him to us.

The Lord Jesus goes on to explain that He and the Father are one – which means that anybody who has had their eyes opened to see the reality of God the Son – has had their eyes opened to see the reality of God the Father.

So John writes here – ***The one who practices evil has never seen God*** (3 John 11c).

- the one who loves and practices and pursues and imitates evil has not had his eyes opened to the precious reality of Jesus and the glory of God the Father.

His eyes are closed!

John Knox the reformer wrote on this text, the one who loves evil has caught no glimpse of God.^v

It’s as if John is posing a question – who are you imitating? Who’s your model? Who do you talk like and walk like? Is it someone whose life is evil or maybe they’re just trivial or shallow . . . they’re a mile wide and an inch deep.

Or are you imitating someone who has seen the reality of the gospel and the glory of God – whose life is probably not into whatever is trending on the video screen at the Shell gas station.

You decide . . . who do you want to follow?

The Apostle John says, “I’ve got somebody in mind, worthy of imitation.

Following John’s mandate to obey, he now provides us with:

A Role-Model to Observe

Verse 12 introduces us to:

Demetrius . . . (3 John 12a).

His name means “belonging to Demeter” – she was the goddess of agriculture. Which means Demetrius had been born into an unbelieving family with idolatrous parents who had been absorbed into the pagan culture of Greece and Rome – even to the point of dedicating their son to a pagan goddess.^{vi}

We know absolutely nothing about him other than his brief appearance here in this letter. But you can only imagine the testimony of salvation he must have had.

By the way, if you’re under the impression that the only people worth following are people who come from a long line of godly believers – it’s time you met Demetrius.

Beloved, the work of God in your life and through your life doesn’t depend on a

pedigree with all the right background and connections. God's Spirit is not handicapped in your life because your parents weren't saved or your extended family – perhaps to this day – doesn't believe the gospel.

Demetrius was named in honor of a pagan goddess; he's a first generation Christian. I love that! And get this – as far as John is concerned, Demetrius is the pattern for Christians to imitate in this particular church.

I can imagine that Demetrius blushed and turned beet red as this letter was read in the assembly.

What made him worthy of imitation?

To answer that, John slips into the language of the court – he uses a word several times from the context of someone giving legal testimony in a court of law.

First, there is what I'll call:

The Testimony of Reliability

Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone (3 John 12a).

Having *a good testimony* is related to the idea in *verse 11* to someone who is doing good. The Apostle Peter often connects the concept of doing good with doing the right thing – *1 Peter 2:20 & 3:6*.

In other words, Demetrius has a reputation for doing the right thing.

You pull anybody over who knows Demetrius and ask them, "What do you know about this guy?" And they *all* would say the same thing about him . . . "He always does the right thing . . . you can bank on Demetrius doing what's right."

I read recently of a 19 year-old college student who was standing on the platform waiting in the New York subway station. He suddenly suffered a seizure and he stumbled down the platform and fell onto one of the train tracks, directly in the path of an incoming train.

A 50-year old construction worker was standing on that same busy platform with his two daughters and realized that nobody else was going to help, so he jumped down onto the tracks and grabbed the young man and rolled

into a drainage trough that had been cut between the tracks.

An instant later, the train cars thundered over both of them with only inches to spare. Neither man was injured.

In the following days, this older man was rewarded, presented the city's highest award for civic achievement; he was given \$10,000 dollars, invited onto television talk shows and on and on.

He was humbled by it all and downplayed it all by saying that someone just needed my help.

The executive director of the Transportation Authority disagreed, calling what he did nothing less than a death-defying act of bravery. He then said this – and this marked my thinking – he was at the right place at the right time and he did the right thing.^{vii}

It strikes me that we as believers are in the right place at the right time . . . are we choosing – can people rely upon us – to do the right thing. You will be worth following when you do.

Let's call testimony number 2 to the witness stand – we'll call it:

The Testimony of Integrity

John writes in verse 12:

Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself (3 John 12a)

The truth declares that Demetrius is worth following. And maybe you're thinking, this is redundant – we've already been told how reliable and trustworthy he is . . . and everybody agrees.

Why do we need the testimony of the truth?

Because what people know about us might not be the truth.

John Wooden was credited as saying that your character is what you really are, while your reputation is what people think you are.

It's possible to polish a public reputation while hiding a host of private corruption.

Not too long ago I read the biography of a man who was at the top of the ladder. His

yacht cost seven million; his jet cost another 24 million. He owned homes in France and Palm Beach, but spent most of his time in his 10,000 square foot apartment on Lexington Avenue in New York City.

Everyone wanted to know him; people stood in line to shake his hand. To stand in his Manhattan office, the author wrote, was to stand in the epicenter of investment success. Or so it seemed until that cold December morning when he finally confessed to having orchestrated a 20 year-long Ponzi scheme.

When he finally confessed to his wife and two sons that Christmas morning, he told them – and I quote – “everything was one big lie.”

This would become the largest financial crime in US history and his clients would be swindled out of 65 billion dollars.^{viii}

His reputation was vastly different than his character. His influence was a mile wide but only an inch deep.

The Apostle John personifies truth and makes it a person, if you will, and then calls truth to the witness stand to testify to the reality of Demetrius.

It’s as if John understands, “I know it’s possible for everyone to think highly of Demetrius and for everyone to be fooled . . . so I call on truth to take the stand . . . and truth declares, “Demetrius is the genuine item . . . there are no skeletons in his closet . . . what you see in public is what he is in private.”

So you have the testimony of reliability; the testimony of integrity and now finally:

The Testimony of Accountability

John writes, “*And we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true*” (3 John 12b).

The plural pronouns seem to best indicate that John is referring to his home church in Ephesus, and his own personal testimony having spent time with Demetrius.^{ix}

You want a model worth imitating? Let me ask it another way – are you willing to be this kind of model?

It’s one thing to watch someone who’s worth following; it’s another thing to be *watched* and worth following.

On a wall near the main entrance to the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, is a portrait of a man with the following inscription: James Butler Bonham – no picture of him exists. This portrait is of his nephew, Major James Bonham who greatly resembled his uncle. It is placed here by the family that people may know the appearance of the man who died for our freedom.^x

No literal portrait of Jesus exists either. But we’ve been placed here – to show people His likeness . . . a family resemblance . . . a demonstration in life – so that through us God can be seen to a world that is watching us . . . that is cynical . . . that’s been disappointed . . . deceived . . . it’s wondering . . . are we more a mile wide and an inch deep.

Are we more than that?

By the grace of God and our willing surrender, let’s be more than that!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 05/12/2019 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2019 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved.

-
- i Brandon Hatmaker, [A Mile Wide](#) (Nelson Books, 2016), p. xi
- ii Life Application Bible, [1, 2 & 3 John](#) (Tyndale, 1998), p. 152
- iii Adapted from Gary Derickson, [Evangelical Exegetical Commentary: 1, 2 & 3 John](#) (Lexham Press, 2014), p. 692
- iv Karen H. Jobes, [Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1, 2 & 3 John](#) (Zondervan, 2014), p. 322
- v Adapted from Herschel H. Hobbs, [The Epistles of John](#) (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 170
- vi Adapted from D. Edmond Hiebert, [The Epistles of John](#) (BJU Press, 1991), p. 343
- vii Verena Dobnik, “NYC Subway Savior Showered with Gifts” (Associated Press (1-4-07)
- viii Adapted from Max Lucado, [Unshakable Hope](#) (Thomas Nelson, 2018), p. 59
- ix Derickson, p. 699
- x Citation: <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1996/october/358.html>