



Class 14 - 1, 2, 3 John, 1 Thessalonians

New Testament Seminar - Immanuel Church

The Love of the Kingdom: 1, 2, 3 John

When asked what was the greatest command, Jesus replied that we are to love the Lord our God and that we are to love our neighbor. Now, to our modern ears, that needs some defining. So often, our culture evaluates the quality of love by its sincerity and by its freeness. On the one hand, love is a sentiment—“warm puppy dog kisses.” On the other hand, it makes no obligations or requirements on the object of its love—“Love is... never having to say I’m sorry.” Or through the lens of the latest Hollywood romance, love is sparked by a random interaction on the street that leads to subsequent chance encounters and then a lifetime of romantic fulfillment and bliss.

So is that what this love of the Kingdom, this love of God and neighbor, looks like? A positive feeling? When Jesus commands his followers to love God and love one another, is he simply telling us that we should like each other and consider God our friend? No. Fair enough. I’m guessing that most of us here don’t think that way. But, especially if you’re a Christian, where would you go in Scripture to prove that this overly sentimental, hollow-sounding conception of love is wrong? And, positively, what is the alternative?

Well, this is a good thing to keep in mind as we enter into John’s epistles. As Jesus’ example of washing the disciples’ feet illustrated, the love of the Kingdom is profoundly different from our culture’s idea of love, both in its depth and in its expression. Ultimately, this kind of love is supremely defined by the cross, where God demonstrated that He is love, and because we are radically undeserving of his love, his love is characterized by mercy, humility, and sacrifice. John, who had his feet washed by Jesus, was transformed by the love of the kingdom. And in John’s three letters, he explains just what that love was, and the effect it should have on our lives as subjects of Jesus Christ, and how this sort of love makes all the difference in showing that our Christianity is real, not counterfeit.

Background to John's Epistles

Let's begin with some background to these three short letters. While these epistles are technically anonymous, there is strong internal and external evidence that the author is John the apostle. In 1 John the author makes a clear claim to be an apostle from the very beginning. Let's look at 1 Jn 1:1-3:

1:1-3 *"What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have observed and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may also have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."*

Here, John claims that he is one of the "we" who saw, touched, and heard the word of life. And the language is clearly similar to the language of the 4th gospel. If, as we argued in the class on John's gospel, that John the apostle wrote the gospel, and we see that an apostle wrote 1 John, it seems almost certain that John is that apostle. Additionally, all the earliest church witnesses attribute the three epistles to John the apostle.

We don't know exactly when John wrote his three letters, but they were probably written toward the end of his life, about the same time he wrote his Gospel, which would place it around A.D. 90. The second two letters are both written in anticipation of a personal visit, 2 John addressed to a church and 3 John addressed to an individual named Gaius. They are both largely concerned with warnings about supporting false teachers and encouragements to show genuine hospitality to Christian preachers. (**3 John 5, 7**). We will spend the majority of our time this morning in the largest of the 3 letters, 1 John. So let's dive in,

Purpose of 1 John

1 John can be a difficult book to understand, especially if we pull verses out of the context of the entire book, so it is essential with this book—perhaps more than most in the New Testament—to understand the overarching aim of the letter. Look at 5:13: *"I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."*

The reason, as we see in this book, is that there was rampant false teaching concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. So John writes to oppose this teaching and to provide categories by which these believers could be assured of their salvation. Look at 2:22-23: *"Who is the liar, if not*

the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This one is the antichrist: the one who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; he who confesses the Son has the Father as well.”

Just as an overview, it seems that the false teachers were saying that (1) they were without sin (1:8), (2) that Jesus did not come in the flesh (2:22-23), (3) that Jesus did not die as an atoning sacrifice for our sin (5:6). And John indicates that (4) these false teachers did not love other Christians (2:11) or (5) care about holiness (3:6-8). But these false teachers did seem to be saying that Christians who disagreed with *them*, namely, those who were following Christ through the teaching of apostles like John, were in fact no Christians at all. And so John writes, really, from two perspectives. Doctrinally, he is writing to refute these false teachers. Pastorally, he wants to give his followers ground for assurance, given the doubt that false teachers were sowing in their minds. And not a blanket assurance like “just take my word for it; you really are in Christ.” But assurance grounded in solid evidence so that people could assess their *own* lives and see evidences of God’s grace.

And in those two linked purposes, we see the real beauty of the book of 1 John: a doctrinal treatise, yes, but one designed to be applied directly to our hearts, that we might know we are in fact in Christ.

Outline of 1 John

Now, turning to the outline of 1 John, let me explain how we’re going to approach this book. In one sense, the book of 1 John is difficult to read because, as much as we might like him to, John doesn’t stick to one train of argument as the apostle Paul so often does. Instead, you might think of the book as a number of themes that John returns to again and again, weaving them into the overall tapestry of the book. And so in another sense, it’s a delightful book to read because it feels so evident he is pastoring us, not arguing with us. His book feels less like a legal treatise and more like the kind of conversation you might have with your pastor, repeating the same truths again and again, in slightly different ways, to assure you of the confidence we have in Christ.

So, let’s first walk through the outline of the book to so we can see how it all works together, and you can follow along on your handout.

Introduction: Proclaim the word of Life (1:1-4)

John's introduction to the letter? Look at 1:3: *"what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may also have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."* Here's an eyewitness of Jesus, proclaiming the message of Jesus, so that believers would know that fellowship with God and others is centered on a right understanding of Jesus.

First Meditation on Assurance (1:5-2:14)

How do we know we are in Christ? By looking at the fruit of our lives.

Look at 1:5-7: *"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in him. If we say, "We have fellowship with him," and yet we walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."* We know that we are in Christ if we walk in the light. But John is quick to clarify: walking in the light *doesn't* mean that we *never* sin; look at 1:10-2:1: *"If we say, "We have not sinned," we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing you these things so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ the righteous one."*

John continues, saying in 2:5 that obedience to God's commands is another sign that we are in Christ – specifically the obedience of loving brothers in Christ – look at 2:9-10: *"The one who says he is in the light but hates his brother or sister is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother or sister remains in the light"*

And then John closes this section very pastorally, identifying evidences of grace in his readers to assure them that they are in fact in Christ, they do meet these tests; look at 2:12: *"I am writing to you, little children, since your sins have been forgiven on account of his name."* Sometimes John's standards seem impossibly high, and so it's really good to remember verses like this one – we can be assured of our salvation because we have trusted in Christ for forgiveness. John affirms his readers have met this standard.

So, next, John offers a:

Warning against following the world (2:15-27)

Look at 2:15, he says, *“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”*

Then he picks up again on the topic of assurance, echoing many of the things he said before.

Second Meditation On Assurance (2:28-4:6)

He says, we know we are in Christ if we do what is right (2:28-3:10) – Listen to 3:6, *“Everyone who remains in him does not sin; everyone who sins has not seen him or known him.”* And, like earlier, he says, we know we are in Christ if we love one another (3:11-23) – For example, 3:16, *“This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”* But it’s not only obedience and love that affirm our assurance – importantly, John reminds us that the Holy Spirit’s presence confirms our position in Christ (3:24-4:6) – 3:24, *“The one who keeps his commands remains in him, and he in him. And the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he has given us.”*

John then proceeds to a strong:

Exhortation toward love and faith (4:7-5:12)

On love, (4:7-5:4a) listen to 4:10-11: *“Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another.”* -And then on faith, (5:4b-12) John says in 5:10, *“The one who believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself.”*

And then John finishes with some

Concluding Remarks in 5:13-21

That’s a rapid fire overview of the book. In a moment we’ll dive into three major themes. Before we do so, any questions or comments so far?

Now, let’s examine a few of John’s major themes. A good summary for what we’ll see is 3:23-24: *“Now this is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps his commands remains in him, and he in him. And the way*

we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he has given us.” In these verses we see a summary of the three tests John provides for knowing whether we are in Christ or not. Doctrinal: Do you believe the right things about who Jesus is? Moral: Do you obey the commands of God? Social: Do you love the people of God? Let’s look at these three tests in turn.

Doctrinal Test:

Look at 2:22: *“Who is the liar, if not the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This one is the antichrist: the one who denies the Father and the Son.”*

Throughout this book, we see John countering false teachers who are denying that Jesus is fully God and fully man. These teachers separated out Christ’s “divine” spirit and his “fleshly” body. For us today, this may seem like an academic discussion that while important doesn’t seem to have a lot of impact on us today. Others wonder if focusing on doctrine is somewhat arrogant, or a hindrance to unity among believers. *Is this false teaching merely an academic matter? Is it a roadblock to unity? Not at all. Without a fully human and fully divine mediator, we cannot have the atoning sacrifice for sins that we need: A sacrifice that is both made by an appropriate representative of the human race, and one that is infinitely valuable. Believing in the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus is of paramount Gospel significance, even key to knowing who the Holy Spirit is – look at 4:2-3: “This is how you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.”*

So, right belief is crucial to our assurance as believers. Getting rid of central doctrine makes no more sense than jettisoning the engine of a truck because it’s too heavy and can slow us down. Yes, doctrine sometimes divides. Yes, discussing doctrine can sometimes seem not that immediately practical. But without the truth of the gospel, the whole thing is really less than worthless.

So often, we are most concerned with attacks on Christianity and the Gospel by atheists and skeptics. Yet, 1 John serves as an example to us today, that the greatest dangers the church faces are not from the likes of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, or Christopher Hitchens. *The real danger is not unbelief, but wrong belief, not irreligion, but heresy; not the doubter, but the deceiver. Wrong belief, heresy, and deceivers are what concern John. So John refutes the idea that Christ was merely a fleshless, impersonal principal that we tap into for higher energy... He also refutes the idea that Jesus was merely a teacher who taught the way of God, who became hungry and tired, and who one*

day bled to death... No, he was God himself. We must get the doctrine of Christ's person right, as John presents it, because our salvation hangs on it.

But clearly, as far as John is concerned, doctrine alone is not enough. We know from James that even the demons believe the "right" things about who Jesus is. And so John gives us another test for knowing we are in Christ.

The Moral Test:

Look at 3:7-10. John says, *"Children, let no one deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. The one who commits sin is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the devil's works. Everyone who has been born of God does not sin, because his seed remains in him; he is not able to sin, because he has been born of God. This is how God's children and the devil's children become obvious. Whoever does not do what is right is not of God, especially the one who does not love his brother or sister."* (3-10)

Such black and white teaching, isn't it? Does that mean if I sin I'm no longer a child of God? Of course not. Look back earlier in 1 John to refute that erroneous thought, like 2:1, where John said that if any Christian sins, Jesus speaks to the Father in our defense. Remember that in this book especially, we need to take each piece in light of the whole. But, at the same time, don't let that soften the sharp point John is making. John states things in a black and white way in this letter—"Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God"—and that's incredibly convicting in casting the light of simplicity into our lives as Christians. 1 John is so useful in that sense, giving us full nuance in context, but in particular verses showing us how simple things really are.

What John is saying in this passage is that *if you are a child of God, you will live like God. If you are a child of the devil, you will live like the devil. That's all there is to it. Now, no Christian perfectly lives like God. And thankfully, no non-Christian lives exactly like the devil... Still, the contrasts between love of the world versus love of God, light versus darkness, and children of God versus children of the devil are stark and absolute. Your life will display one general pattern or the other.*

In all of this, John is certainly not saying that "nice people are Christians." All of us know nice people who are not Christians. Many of us, before we were Christians, were nice people. No, the moral test is subsequent to the doctrinal test. You might say it is the proof of the doctrinal test.

Finally, the Social Test:

One of the first ways we know that we are obeying the moral test John provides is whether we are loving one another. Look at 4:19-21: *“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And we have this command from him: The one who loves God must also love his brother and sister.”*

What makes us think that we love God? Is it our doctrinal correctness? Is it our meticulous obedience? Or is it that warm fuzzy feeling that we get when you sing his praises? Well, those will be shown to be only a mirage if our love for God is not demonstrated in love for his people. Jesus so identifies with his people that he says that our attitude towards others Christians *is* our attitude towards him.

John is explicitly clear throughout this book on this point. In 3:14 he says, *“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers and sisters.”* There is no middle ground option with John, no option of loving the brothers you like to be around or are able tolerate. No, you can believe all the correct doctrine you want, read all the right Christian books, have an outwardly upright life, and yet if you do not love the people of God, you are not a Christian! You may object and say, but I love God, I love Jesus, I love learning about Him and following Him, I can't help that some people just aren't my type. Think back on the verses we just considered from chapter 4, John reasons that if can't love a brother, who has been loved by God and is the image of God, how can you love the God that you have not seen who created and loved this brother or sister. John argues from the greater to the lesser: Those who love God love others, so if you're not doing the lesser, there's no way that you're doing the greater.

And, John challenges us to express our love for others, especially other believers, in real, practical ways: look at 3:17-18: *“If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God's love reside in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth.”* In other words, We do not just need doctrinal belief and morality... We also need the active love that induces church members to give themselves away for one another. We need to learn to love people who do not look like we do or act as we do... The most honest test of Christian love is whether we love those with whom we have disagreed or had difficulty.

Summary of 1 John

That's the social test that John provides. And, to sum this book up, we see that if any of these tests John provides are taken apart from the others, they become hollow. The Christian finds great assurance as we believe the right things about Jesus, obey what God has commanded, and love our brothers and sisters. Our assurance is not based on some spiritual experience in the distant past. If you are struggling to know whether you are in Christ, consider these tests that John provides, and while we will not obey or love perfectly, ask yourself, ask a close Christian friend, "does my life look different because of who I believe Jesus to be? Am I seeking to obey His word and to love others?"

I hope that we will be people who heed the words of John and live lives that are radically altered by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. After all, that was John's purpose for writing the letter in the first place. Before we move on to John's other letters, any questions?

Now let's consider 2 John and 3 John, much shorter letters which we'll move through more quickly.

2 John

The key theme in 2 John is this: Christians should not support those who are false teachers. Look at vv. 10-11: *"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your home, and don't greet him; for the one who greets him shares in his evil works."*

John tells us here that there is a huge difference between what is appropriate in relating to false teachers who claim to be Christians, compared with non-Christians who simply recognize themselves to be Non-Christians. To Non-Christians who know they are non-Christians we are to show great generosity and hospitality. But we are not to help the person who claims to teach the truth about Jesus, but in fact tells lies about Jesus. Look at v. 7: *"Many deceivers have gone out into the world; they do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist."*

In our increasingly pluralistic religious culture, many consider it charitable to assume that anyone who calls themselves a Christian in fact is one; but this is a dangerous assumption. Just as 1 John called us to examine ourselves to see if we have right doctrine, obedience, and love which characterize genuine salvation, so 2 John says that, to the best of our ability, we have a responsibility to ensure that those we support in ministry are faithful in that ministry, and are

teaching the truth about Jesus.

Now, this call that John makes to not take the false teacher into your house is one that we must understand correctly. In that culture, having someone in your home was not only a significant source of support to them, but a sign to the surrounding community that you endorsed what they were doing. For our purposes today, I think we should think of this pattern in those terms. As you think of false teachers, we shouldn't do anything that would even hint that we affirm or endorse their teaching. And do nothing that would directly support such false teaching. Does that mean you cannot eat with your Muslim co-worker or invite your atheist brother for Christmas? Of course not. But, it does mean that we should not give financial and practical support to those who claim the name of Christ but preach a false gospel – Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, those who teach Roman Catholic doctrine. That is the warning that 2 John gives us.

3 John

If 2 John focuses on why *not* to extend hospitality to false teachers, 3 John is about why to extend hospitality to faithful teachers. The character of two individuals in this short letter, Gaius and Diotrophes, shape the theme of this book.

Look at verses 9-11: John says, *"I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have first place among them, does not receive our authority. This is why, if I come, I will remind him of the works he is doing, slandering us with malicious words. And he is not satisfied with that! He not only refuses to welcome fellow believers, but he even stops those who want to do so and expels them from the church. Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God."*

First, Diotrephes. What do we know about him? Is he sympathetic with false teachers? Has he personally fallen out with John the elder? There is much this little letter does not tell us. But it does say Diotrephes *"loves to have first place among them"* (v. 9). Diotrephes makes trouble for the Gospel by loving himself first.

After commenting on the character of Diotrephes, John says, *"The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God."* While John does not go as far as calling Diotrephes a false teacher in the same mold as those in 1 John, he certainly seems to be pointing to him as an example of what church leaders should not be.

And then there is Gaius. Look at verse 5: *"Dear friend, you are acting faithfully in whatever you do for the brothers and sisters, especially when they are strangers."* Gaius was showing hospitality to

true Christian preachers. Gaius loves the brothers; Diotrephes loves himself. Gaius gives out of his own for the brethren; Diotrephes wants to make sure things go his way. So, if ever there was one who understood right doctrine, obeyed God's commands, and loved other Christians like 1 John calls us to do, Gaius seems to be the one. And so we read in verses 6-8 what Gaius should continue to do. *"They have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God, since they set out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from pagans. Therefore, we ought to support such people so that we can be coworkers with the truth."*

Who are these men? They seem to be some kind of gospel workers; missionaries, perhaps. And hospitality toward them is commanded. A pattern we should also follow. I don't know if you've thought of it before, but when we host a visiting missionary family, or we send money to support them overseas, or we show hospitality in countless other ways, we aren't just "supporting" them. No, verse 8 says we are working together with them for the truth. We are in fact part of their ministry. So all the more reason for us to look for the most strategic Gospel ministry going on in the world and support it, that we may find one day we participated together with them in that work.

Conclusion

So... as we look at these 3 letters, how *do* we distinguish between real and counterfeit Christianity? How do we know what true love is? In 1 John, we have biblical reasons to evaluate if someone is, if we are, in Christ – do they affirm the divinity and humanity of Jesus? Do they walk in God's light? Do they love the body of Christ? In 2 John, we have instruction on what true love is not – it is not supporting and endorsing false teachers who deny Christ. And in 3 John, we have a real life example of what true love is: a man who walked in the light by opening up his home in love to those who preached the truth about Jesus. I pray that we would be instructed by the stark, black and white commands of John in his first letter; I pray that we would heed the warning of his second letter; and I pray that we would follow the example of Gaius in his third letter, because, as Jesus said, *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* (Jn. 13:35).

1 Thessalonians

In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches us how to pray using these words, *“Our Father in heaven, your name be honored as holy. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* We are all quite familiar with these words; but do you think it will ever happen? Do you think there will ever be a time when God’s will will be done on earth as it is in heaven? As we near the end of our survey of the New Testament we now turn to the books of I & II Thessalonians. The last few weeks we’ve been looking at letters in the New Testament that have been written about false teachers. How to spot them. What to do with them. Now, as we turn to Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, we’ll continue to have in mind various errors in the church—but we’ll also consider Paul’s emphasis on Jesus’ second coming—when all things that are false will be forever done away with and the true light of the glory of Christ will shine for eternity.

II. Purpose & Background

Turning to purpose and background, let’s look at 1:4-6, where we’ll see the context that led Paul to write this letter: *“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full assurance. You know how we lived among you for your benefit, and you yourselves became imitators of us and of the Lord when, in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with joy from the Holy Spirit.”* Paul had preached this good news in the large city of Thessalonica and founded a church there during his second missionary journey, as related in Acts 17. He only spent a few weeks there but his visit was successful—we read in Acts 17:4 that *“Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, including a large number of God-fearing Greeks, as well as a number of the leading women.”*

But after that, fierce persecution arose and the believers smuggled Paul out of the city in the night. Because Paul left abruptly and without having spent much time among them, he had never finished teaching the basic matters of Christianity, and the church’s foundations were not complete and solid. Several strange problems had grown up after his premature departure. Apparently, some individuals in Thessalonica opposed this new religion by accusing Paul of being a money-grubbing self-promoter. As soon as circumstances became difficult, they said, he snuck out of town. There were also doctrinal difficulties. Chiefly, The Thessalonians worried that if a Christian died before Christ returned, he or she would be lost forever. So Paul sent Timothy to find out how the Thessalonian church was doing – if they still held to the word they’d heard

from him. Timothy has returned with a good report, and so Paul writes this letter around 51 AD to defend his ministry among them, clarify basic doctrine about death and the Second Coming, and reassure the Thessalonians with hope.

III. Outline

To see how he did that, let's look at an outline of the letter and see how it's structured. As you'll see in your handout, 1 Thessalonians falls into two parts. In Chapters 1-3, Paul's main purpose is the defense of his ministry. He opens the letter, prays for the Thessalonians (1:2-3), and expresses confidence in their salvation – that's 1:4 – 1:10. Next, he describes his ministry among them, defends it against false accusations, reiterates his desire to visit them again, and recounts Timothy's good report – that's 2:1 – 3:10. He concludes this section with another prayer in 3:11 – 13.

Then, in keeping with his claims to love them, he moves on in Chapters 4-5 to exhort and teach them in response to their specific weaknesses and failings. First, he reminds them of the need to live lives pleasing to God in 4:1-12. Then, he spends about a chapter, in 4:13 – 5:11, on the main doctrinal exposition that the letter is known for: death, the Second Coming of Jesus, and the final judgment. His purpose in all of this is simply encouragement. As he writes in the middle of this section, in 4:18, *“Therefore encourage one another with these words.”* And finally he concludes, as in many of his letters, with instructions and greetings in 5:12-28.

OK. So that's the basic structure. As we dive in to consider these words more carefully, we'll look at three major themes. First, we'll begin in the first half of the letter, looking at Paul's **pastoral ministry** among the Thessalonians. Then we'll see two themes in the second half: first, Paul's exhortations to the Thessalonians on basic **signs of the Christian life**, and finally, his teaching about the second coming of Christ. And in all of this, our focus should be on better understanding what our lives should look like in light of Jesus' soon and certain return.

IV. Major Themes

A. So, first, Pastoral Ministry

The first half of Paul's letter is largely about his pastoral ministry among the Thessalonians. What I'd like to do is take an overview of what he says and identify from it seven key signs of

Paul's ministry, and by extension any genuine Christian ministry. But these aren't just things that we should look for in a godly pastor, but signs that should characterize all of our lives as servants of Christ in his church.

1. So, let's dive in. The first sign of a genuine Christian ministry? Prayer. Paul prays for these young Christians. In fact, his prayers constitute one of the most constant and recurring aspects of the letter. He thanks God for what he has already done in the church, and he asks him to do still more. Look at 1:2-3 with me: *"We always thank God for all of you, making mention of you constantly in our prayers. We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."* specifically mentioning *"your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."* (1:2-3). For another example, turn to 3:9-13: *"How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you, as we pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith? Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you. And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we do for you. May he make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen."*

Note how Paul characterizes his prayer. He says that *"remembering before our God and Father"* (1:3) their work and faith and love. Praying for others is considering evidences of how God's Spirit has been at work in them and thanking God; and it is considering their needs and directing these requests to the Father. It's amazing to think that when we are meeting with God individually, we can come before him and intercede for our brothers and sisters in Christ, which this book teaches us is a selfless and generous way to spend our time with the Lord. And note how Paul prays for them in light of the second coming of Christ. He prays that they would be holy and blameless before him at his coming. We should learn from Paul; he focuses his prayer on what is most important, what is eternally lasting. The emphasis is not so much on their circumstances, but their faith, love, and holiness, which is a great model for our prayers.

2. But then, a second mark of a genuine gospel ministry: Self-sacrifice. In his missionary journeys, and not least in his trip to Macedonia, Paul showed he was willing to sacrifice his own safety. He did not benefit by it. Look at chapter 2, verses 1-3: *"For you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our visit with you was not without result. On the contrary, after we had previously suffered and were treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, we were emboldened by our God to speak the gospel of God to you in spite of great opposition."*

For our exhortation didn't come from error or impurity or an intent to deceive.” (2:1-3). Paul did not preach the gospel to the Thessalonians with selfish concern for himself and his own gain, but with pure motives, to please God, not men. Do we only share the good news with others when it's convenient? Do we only speak of Jesus when we're confident it won't diminish our reputation? Or are we willing to sacrifice our standing and our comfort for the sake of the Gospel like Paul?

3. Third. Motherly love. Motherly love is also a sign of genuine ministry. Paul writes in 2:7-8, *“we were gentle among you, as a nurse nurtures her own children. We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.”* Paul was not harsh, but gentle. He did not take from them but was delighted to share with them.
4. Fourth, Fatherly integrity and encouragement. Next, Paul says that he exhibited a fatherly lifestyle among them, and now he encourages them with fatherly counsel. We see this in 2:10-12: *“You are witnesses, and so is God, of how devoutly, righteously, and blamelessly we conducted ourselves with you believers. As you know, like a father with his own children, we encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you to live worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”* Even as Paul instructs us on the purity and care that should characterize all of us as we speak to other Christians, by way of analogy he gives us wisdom for parenting as well - Paul assumes that a godly father encourages, comforts, and urges his children toward godliness.
5. Fifth, Desire for fellowship. Paul desires to be with the Thessalonians and fellowship with them. They are not just his friends. They are his spiritual family. He writes, in 2:17, *“But as for us, brothers and sisters, after we were forced to leave you for a short time (in person, not in heart), we greatly desired and made every effort to return and see you face to face.”* Several times Paul mentions his desire to return and see them. In the next chapter he repeats *“we also long to see you,”* (3:6) and *“as we pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face”* (3:10). Such a desire for fellowship is another evidence of a genuine ministry. Think of God's kindness in designing us this way: the more we mature in ministering to his people, the more we desire to spend even more time doing so. God shapes the desires of our hearts the more we soak our hearts in His word! You can't escape Paul's love for the Thessalonians as you read this letter – it's challenging! If you want to grow in your love for your fellow church members here at Immanuel, I'd encourage you to read this letter a few times this week - it only takes 15 or 20 minutes - and ask as you read, “do I love and cherish my church the way Paul loved this church he had only spent a few weeks or

months with?” Let Paul’s love serve as an example for us.

6. Sixth: joy. When we minister faithfully, joy results. Several times Paul says that he rejoices because of the Thessalonians. In chapter 2:19-20 he writes *“For who is our hope or joy or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Indeed you are our glory and joy!”* And in chapter 3 he says, *“How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you”* (3:9). A godly pastor or elder is one who finds evident joy in knowing and leading his flock.
7. And finally, hope. Paul has hope for the Thessalonians. His hope isn’t in them, that they’ll endure on their own – his hope is in the electing God who has chosen them, as he says in 1:4. And above all, he hopes for Christ’s return. Look at 5:23-24: *“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. And may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. [24] He who calls you is faithful; he will do it.”* Paul’s ministry is characterized by hope for the Thessalonians based on his hope in God’s promises and Christ’s return.

So then. Seven marks of genuine Christian ministry. Prayer. Self-sacrifice. Motherly love. Fatherly encouragement. A desire for fellowship. Joy. And hope. Through it all you see Paul’s driving passion for people and his ultimate hope in Jesus Christ. And you see a good model for our own lives.

We can use these 7 marks to reflect on our own ministry in this church. Ministry is not for just pastors and elders; it’s for all of us. And so Paul’s example is useful for all of us. Why do we love others in this church? Paul’s most practical motivation seemed to be that he wanted a front-row seat to observe the supernatural power of God at work in the hearts of these believers, so that he could rejoice before God because of them. That’s a great example for us—especially in contrast to the mixed motives we so often have. How did he avoid making people his “projects?” He loved them. He earnestly desired to be with them. His heart was torn when he had to leave. Did he only serve when it was convenient? Certainly not. And that self-sacrifice only compounded his joy.

And, of course, you can use this book beyond just reflecting on your own personal ministry. Use these chapters to encourage and exhort other Christian friends. Use them to evaluate a pastoral ministry at a church you may consider joining—or at your own church. A church you consider joining must have solid doctrine – it must cling to the same gospel that Paul declares in 5:9-10 of this book. But you should also look for the careful, compassionate type of leadership that Paul exemplifies in his relationship with the Thessalonians. And, finally, we can use these passages to

encourage faithful ministers of the gospel who are following the pattern laid out by Paul. That's the first half of the book. Before we move to the second half, any questions?

B. Signs of a Christian Life

Paul doesn't limit himself to describing what a genuine ministry looks like. In chapters 4 and 5 Paul writes and tells them what effect a genuine ministry should have on their lives. As you'll recall from earlier, these exhortations sandwich the core of the letter, the section of the coming of the Lord at the end of chapter 4. So we should be thinking of these exhortations especially in terms of "how should we live in light of Christ's coming return?" Paul begins this section in 4:1-2 by writing, *"Additionally then, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus, that as you have received instruction from us on how you should live and please God—as you are doing—do this even more. For you know what commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus."* Paul follows with, you guessed it, seven points.

1. First, pursue sexual purity. Just after telling them to please God, Paul then spends several sentences repeatedly and specifically telling them to avoid sexual sin, drawing a clear link between the two. Paul writes in 4:3-8, *"For this is God's will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don't know God. This means one must not transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister in this manner, because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses, as we also previously told and warned you. For God has not called us to impurity but to live in holiness. Consequently, anyone who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit."* The connection between obeying God and maintaining sexual purity may actually have been a new idea to the Thessalonians. *Sexual promiscuity was even more accepted and practiced in the ancient pagan world than in our own world*, so it was worth Paul's time to emphasize the point. Note that Paul does not treat sexual sin as something private, or as a "victimless crime." He emphasizes *"one must not transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister"* (4:6). Sexual sin always involves others—including God. *"Consequently, anyone who rejects this does not reject man, but God"* (4:8).
2. Second, we should live lives of brotherly love. Verses 9-10: *"About brotherly love: You don't need me to write you because you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. In fact, you are doing this toward all the brothers and sisters in the entire region of Macedonia. But we encourage you, brothers and sisters, to do this even more"* (4:9-10).

3. Third. Respectability. Paul wants the Thessalonians to live in such a way as to earn the respect of others. Look at 4:11-12, *“to seek to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, so that you may behave properly in the presence of outsiders and not be dependent on anyone.”* The point is not that Paul wants Christians to be focused on polishing their reputation. This is not a popularity contest. No, it is in some ways precisely by doing the opposite of what would lead to popularity and success—by striving to lead a quiet life and mind your own business—that we win not popularity, but genuine respect for the Godly way of life we follow. *You do this not so that others will think well of you but so that the gospel will be commended.* So, far from the coming of the Lord inciting panic, it should spur us on to continue being faithful in respectable and quiet ways.
4. Fourth, Being awake to God. Having detoured to talk directly about the second coming, Paul returns to his list of exhortations in chapter 5:4-8: *“But you, brothers and sisters, are not in the dark, for this day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or the darkness. So then, let us not sleep, like the rest, but let us stay awake and be self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled and put on the armor of faith and love, and a helmet of the hope of salvation.”* (5:4-8). We are to be awake to God. We are not asleep but awake, alert, and self-controlled. Paul wants Christians not to be dulled by this world, deceived by the attractive appearance of its passing pleasures, or blind to the realities that God has made known in his Word. No, we are to be spiritually awake—focused on God’s truth and inwardly directed to the truth that we know but do not yet see.
5. Fifth, Encouraging others. Paul goes on, *“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing. Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to give recognition to those who labor among you and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, and to regard them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we exhort you, brothers and sisters: warn those who are idle, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See to it that no one repays evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all.”* (5:11-15) We are to encourage everyone. Paul especially calls us to give encouragement in two particular cases. First, encourage your pastors and elders. They work hard to be wise and Godly spiritual shepherds for you. Do we encourage them? Do we tell them we appreciate them? Second, Paul tells us to encourage the weak. Weakness is often a temptation to discouragement, so Paul tells Christians to be especially diligent in encouraging those who lack strength in various

ways. I wonder if you know someone in this situation that you could encourage, even this week?

6. Sixth, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, and us, to Live a God-centered life. He says in 5:16-18: *“Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”* How can you be joyful always? If you center your life on God, regardless of what happens at work, regardless of what happens at home, regardless of what happens at church, you can be joyful. Well, how do we make God the center of our lives, so that we by the Spirit’s power do *“pray constantly”* (5:17) and *“give thanks in everything”* (5:18)? It starts with remembering the good news of grace that we’ve received, as Paul says in 5:9-10: *“For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.”* This amazing Gospel is what changes the foundation of our life so that God is at the center.
7. And finally, seventh, live a discerning life. As Paul nears his conclusions, he says, *“Don’t stifle the Spirit. Don’t despise prophecies, but test all things. Hold on to what is good. Stay away from every kind of evil.”* (5:19-22) These are timeless exhortations applicable in every circumstance. *“Test all things.”* Life is short. Don’t waste it on stupid, evil things. Think carefully before you believe something, do something, say something, or promise anything. Evil is everywhere; if we would avoid it, we must pray for discernment.

Those are the ways we are to behave in light of the end of the world. Love each other. Focus on living respectable, quiet lives of faithfulness. Don’t waste your time or energy. Encourage others. Any questions on this section on the Christian life?

C. The Second Coming

So, why should we live in these ways as Christians? The answer, and our final theme in 1 Thessalonians, is because of the second coming – because Jesus is coming back. That is the great truth animating Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, and the point towards which all history is converging. We should live pure and holy lives because Jesus is coming back and we want to live lives worthy of him. We should minister to others because Jesus is coming back and we want others to be prepared. We should spread the gospel because Jesus is coming back and we want everyone in the world to have heard about him before he comes in final judgment.

We should keep in mind four things about Jesus’ return. First, it will certainly happen. Second, we will all witness it, regardless of when it happens, and will all be subject to his judgment. Third,

if you are a Christian, the doctrine should be an encouragement to you. Fourth, no one knows when Jesus will return.

First, **Jesus will return**. Paul describes that glorious day in 4:16-17. *“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”* (4:16-17) Jesus himself taught that he will return, and we see more images of his return throughout the book of Revelation. Scripture is clear and consistent: Jesus is coming back!

Second, **we will all witness his return**. Evidently the Thessalonians were discouraged because some of them had died and the others thought the ones who died would miss out on Jesus’ return. Paul writes to encourage them, in 4:13-15: *“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord’s coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.”* He speaks of death as “sleep” to indicate that, for Christians, it is not the end. Not only will our souls go immediately to be with Jesus in heaven, even our bodies will be resurrected from this “sleep” with Jesus in the new creation.¹ We learn too from Revelation that non-Christians will also be resurrected to receive their final judgment. No one will miss out on Jesus’ return. It is the one event in history that all human beings who have ever lived will experience together.

Third, this doctrine should be an **encouragement** and a prompting to hope and holiness for Christians. Paul gives the Thessalonians a remarkable exhortation after describing the end of the world, in 4:18: *“18Therefore encourage one another with these words.”* Jesus’ return should be an encouragement to us. It is the fulfillment of our hopes, it’s the vindication of our expectations. When Jesus returns, all wrongs will be righted, all apparent injustice corrected. Some Christians

¹It may be useful here to anticipate questions about what happens when Christians die. Paul uses the term “asleep,” but Paul is not teaching the doctrine of “soul sleep,” which is the idea that “when believers die they go into a state of unconscious existence, and the next thing that they are conscious of will be when Christ returns and raises the into eternal life” (Grudem, Systematic Theology, 819). Paul is not indicating that Christians have to wait until the second coming for their souls to be united to God; he is merely showing that for Christians, death is temporary in the same way that sleep is temporary. The plain teaching of scripture is that when people die, the souls of believers go immediately into God’s presence, and the souls of unbelievers go immediately to eternal punishment (Grudem, 816, 822). 2 Cor. 5:8 – “We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord;” Phil. 1:23 – “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;” Luke 23:45 – “Today you will be with me in paradise.” At the second coming of Christ, believers will receive resurrected bodies – “For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52). As Grudem summarizes, “When Christ returns the souls of believers will be reunited with their bodies, their bodies will be raised from the dead, and they will live with Christ eternally (817).

view the end with alarm, fear, or dread. The end will indeed be fearsome because it will be accompanied by God's wrath—but we Christians are spared of that! SHARE GOSPEL... Jesus returns to gather his people to himself, finally and forever. For us his return is only the end of this fallen world marred by sin and death; it is the beginning of the new creation in which as Revelation says, *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away.”* (Revelation 21:4).

Fourth, we don't know when Jesus will return and we shouldn't try to figure it out. Naturally some Christians then, as now, became preoccupied with the idea of Jesus' return and apparently spent some time arguing about when it was going to happen. Paul writes to discourage them from such speculation, in 5:1-3 *“About the times and the seasons: Brothers and sisters, you do not need anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. When they say, “Peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.”* (5:1-3). God explicitly says in his word that we do not and cannot know the day or hour of Jesus' return. We should not listen to anyone who claims to have figured it out. We should, however, remain in eager expectation and preparedness, leading Godly and sober lives so that we will be ready by Jesus comes.

Isn't it amazing how practical all of this gets in 1 Thessalonians? You could almost think of the second half of his letter as “the end of the world, made practical.” So often, this topic invites fevered speculation and silly fantasies – whether it's the latest series of end-times-themed novels or a fascination with the identity of the “man of lawlessness” that is mentioned in 2 Thessalonians. But that kind of teaching and speculation is utterly foreign to Paul's practical, Christ-centered, encouraging explanation of the end of time. One way we could apply this part of the book is by evaluating how much time we spend thinking about the past, the present, and the near future... and then compare that with how often we look forward to eternity with Christ. Hoping in eternity, Paul says, shapes the way that we live now - because it stirs our hope in the Christ who is returning. Any questions?

Conclusion

I hope we can see how the doctrine of the future, even though certain details about it are mysterious, so fundamentally shapes the content of our belief and practice as followers of Christ. Why has Paul's ministry been characterized by the seven aspects we looked at - things like self-sacrifice, prayer, joy, and concern? Because he deeply desires the Thessalonians to be prepared

for that final day. Why should our lives as Christians be characterized by those other seven features, such as brotherly love, sexual purity, discernment? Because we are those who because of the Gospel of God's mercy don't have to fear Christ's return. Instead, our greatest desire is God's glory - that he would be glorified and made much of by his people as we wait for all his good promises to come to fruition.

Listen to how Jonathan Edwards spoke about our longing for this coming day of the Lord: "The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to Heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the ocean."² We look forward to that day because of the glory of God.

This material is adapted from a course with the same name developed by Capitol Hill Baptist Church. It has been modified for our purposes and has been condensed to fit our time schedule. The original version is available on their website at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/new-testament-overview/>.

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²From Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, p. 143, cited in Donald Whitey, *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, p. 128.