

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 23: 1, 2, and 3 John**

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

**Introduction**

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: “*that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life –the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us –that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may 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, I John. So let’s dive in,

With the **Purpose of I John**

I 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 write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”*

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 but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.”*

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: *“That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may 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. Then, in John’s

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 proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he 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 hi word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”*

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: “*Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light,.”*

-And then John closes this section very pastorally, identifying evidences of grace in his readers to assure then that they are in fact in Christ, they do meet these tests; look at 2:12: *“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake.”* 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 Gather 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, “*No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either 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, “*By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”* 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, *“Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom 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: “*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent him Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”* -And then on faith, (5:4b-12) John says in 5:10, “*Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in 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: “*And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom 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 but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he 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: “*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and 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, I 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, “*Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”* (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 hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”*

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 out of death into, because we love the brothers.”* 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: “*But if anyone has the world’s good and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed 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.

**first, 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 house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked 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: “*For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one 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.

**Moving on to 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, “9*I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church. Beloved [that is, Gaius], do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever 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 “likes to put himself first” (v. 9). Diotrephes makes trouble for the Gospel by loving himself first.*

After commenting on the character of Diotrephes, John says, “*Whoever does good is from God; whoever 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 I 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: “*Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are.”* 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. “*You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing form the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for 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 all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (Jn. 13:35).