

1, 2 & 3 John: The marks of a true Christian

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The group of churches that John writes to in this trio of epistles had recently experienced a split because of doctrinal controversy. We do not know the exact content of the error that these false teachers were spreading, but it is apparent from John's writing that their teaching somehow denied the truth of the incarnation—that Jesus was both fully man and fully God. They deceived many people with this teaching and eventually convinced a group to leave with them. John references this group that left in 1 John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they were not of us.” The apostle John was divinely inspired to write these general epistles in order to address this situation with the loving concern of a shepherd for his sheep. He desired both to clearly point out the error of these false teachers and to encourage the believers who remained in these churches.

Often when a group of people leave a church, the members who remain will begin to doubt their own doctrine or even their own salvation, and begin to wonder, “What if those who left are actually

correct?” John seeks to reassure the discouraged remnant that was left after this controversy by pointing out to them the three clear marks of a true child of God. The truth of these marks is to be used in two ways, both to reassure the true child of God of his salvation and to help identify those who are not walking as children of God and may even be false teachers. As most readers are probably members of a church that was recently affected by doctrinal controversy, it is beneficial for all of us to examine our own lives for these three marks.

The first mark of a true Christian that John gives is right doctrine. He speaks harsh words against the false teachers who denied the truth of Christ's incarnation: “And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of anti-christ” (1 John 4:3). Do you believe in God as he is revealed in the holy Scriptures, or a different version of God that more closely aligns with your own personal opinions?

The second mark of a true Christian that John gives is love for others. He reminds us that our love

for our neighbor is evidence of a true love for God with this simple statement: “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20). Do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ? Not just the ones who are easy to love or the ones who agree with you, but all of them?

The third mark of a true Christian that John gives is obedience to God's commands: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:3). Do you strive daily to live your life in a way that is obedient to God's commands in Scripture? Or do you get caught up in the way that the world is telling you to live your life?

The threads of these three marks of a true Christian are woven throughout the books of 1, 2, and 3 John, as are many examples of direct contrasts between the lives of those who are God's children and those who are the children of this world. Although there are some “gray areas” in matters of Christian liberty, the basic aspects of the Christian life are black and white.

Those who truly love God will be characterized by confession of sin, obedience to God's commands, love, truth, and fellowship with God and his people. In contrast, those who do not love God will be characterized by self-deception, disobedience to God's commands, hatred, lies, and fellowship with others who walk in darkness.

The bold words of this epistle are not meant to push us into the ditches of legalism or despair, but rather to encourage us to abide in Christ. “And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us” (1 John 3:24). We cannot “walk in the light” (1:7) apart from the power of the Holy Spirit in us. And while our faith, love, and obedience will always be imperfect on this side of heaven, every tiny step that we take on the right path is evidence of the work of the Spirit in us and gives us confidence that we are true children of God who will live with him forever in glory.

Date	Read	Study	Psalter
Sep 8	1 John 1:1-4	Why is it so important for God's people to understand the truth of the incarnation according to verses 3 and 4?	60
Sep 9	1 John 1:5-7	What does it look like for you to “walk in the light” in your daily life as opposed to walking in darkness?	61
Sep 10	1 John 1:8-10	Can you think of a time when you were tempted to deceive yourself about the true nature of your sin instead of acknowledging and confessing it?	64

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Sep 11	1 John 2:1-2	Why does the promise of Christ's payment for all your sins lead you to "sin not" instead of making you feel free to sin more?	65
Sep 12	1 John 2:3-6	Why is obedience to God's commands a necessary part of the Christian life?	66
Sep 13	1 John 2:7-11	How does the hatred of a brother in Christ show the hypocrisy of someone's faith?	67
Sep 14	1 John 2:12-14	What two specific reassurances does John give to the young men here? How do they encourage you in your life as a young person?	94
Sep 15	1 John 2:15-17	Think of a specific thing you are often tempted to love more than God. Why is it so foolish to love this thing?	140
Sep 16	1 John 2:18-19	How do the "antichrists" that John refers to here differ from the antichrist that is still to come?	154
Sep 17	1 John 2:20-27	How does the fact that you are anointed with the Spirit of truth encourage you as you endeavor to study the Bible on your own?	155
Sep 18	1 John 2:28-29	How does thinking about the imminent coming of Christ drive home the importance of abiding in him? How do you abide in him?	230
Sep 19	1 John 3:1-3	How does the extraordinary love of God transform those upon whom he bestows it?	233
Sep 20	1 John 3:4-10	Given that we have already read in 1 John 1:8-10 that all men are sinful, what does John mean when he writes, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin" (v. 9)?	234
Sep 21	1 John 3:11-15	Are you ever tempted to minimize the sin of hating one of your brothers or sisters in Christ? How does John's teaching here remind you of the seriousness of hatred?	236
Sep 22	1 John 3:16-18	Is your life characterized by love? What are some practical ways that you could show the love of God to others?	241
Sep 23	1 John 3:19-24	How does God's promise here encourage you when you experience guilt because of your own inability to obey God's commands perfectly?	242
Sep 24	1 John 4:1-6	How can you identify false teachers in your church according to these verses?	261

Sep 25	1 John 4:7-10	What does it mean that Jesus is the propitiation for our sins? How is this the ultimate example of love?	264
Sep 26	1 John 4:11-16	What is the difference between worldly kindness and Christian love? Why can't there be any true love apart from God?	268
Sep 27	1 John 4:17-21	What kind of fear does the love of God drive away? Why?	270
Sep 28	1 John 5:1-3	What is the connection between belief, love, and obedience in the Christian life according to these verses?	298
Sep 29	1 John 5:4-5	In what ways do you engage in spiritual warfare each day? How does God's promise here give you encouragement in this warfare?	299
Sep 30	1 John 5:6-13	Have you ever been in a situation (perhaps in a college classroom) where you were tempted to believe the words of man over the word of God? How did you remind yourself of the truth?	308
Oct 1	1 John 5:14-17	Do you ever pray for others in your church who are caught up in sin? How can you improve in this area?	314
Oct 2	1 John 5:18-20	How are John's affirmations here about what every Christian knows to be true different from the kinds of affirmations that are so popular today?	321
Oct 3	1 John 5:21	How does John's final warning to "keep yourselves from idols" fit in with the main theme of this epistle?	325
Oct 4	2 John 1-6	Why is it so important for a child of God to walk in both truth and love? What happens if one or the other is missing?	330
Oct 5	2 John 7-13	Why is it so dangerous to even entertain someone who is a false teacher?	341
Oct 6	3 John 1-8	What can you learn from the good example of Gaius' life?	381
Oct 7	3 John 9-14	What can you learn about how the sin of pride affects the church from John's description of Diotrephes?	401