

# Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, January 12, 2021 – First Baptist Church Buda  
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study

*Steadfast*  
**CHRISTIANITY**  
*A Study of Second Thessalonians*

**“Your Distinguishing Mark”**  
**2 Thessalonians 3:16-18**

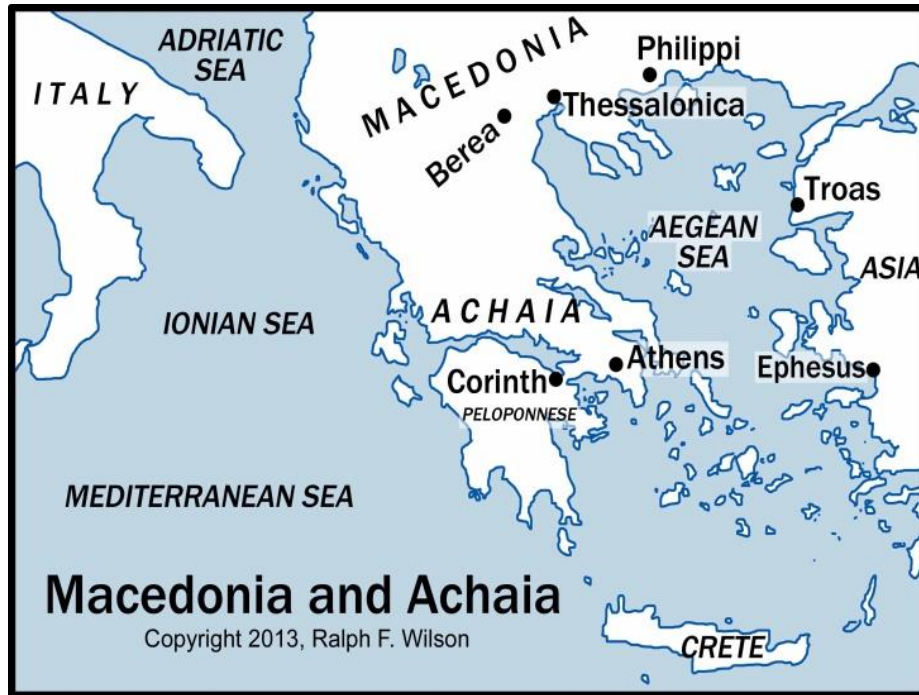
*“<sup>16</sup> Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you all. <sup>17</sup> The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is a sign in every <sup>19</sup>epistle; so I write. <sup>18</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.” -2 Thessalonians 3:16-18 (NKJV)*

Here is our overview of 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians briefly... again, just to help us get the picture in historical context...

## **Overview of 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians:**

- (1) TYPE OF LITERATURE: A first century letter**
- (2) AUTHOR OF THE LETTER: The Apostle Paul (with Silas and Timothy)**
- (3) PLACE OF THE WRITING THE LETTER: Corinth**
- (4) DATE OF THE LETTER: Written from in approximately A.D. 51-52**
- (5) PURPOSE OF THE LETTER: (1) To deal with false teaching, (2) To encourage believers in the midst of persecution**

**BRIEF HISTORY OF THESSALONICA:** The city of Thessalonica is known today as Salonika and is the second largest city in Greece. It came into being in 315 B.C. Founded by the Greek general Cassander, who later became king of Macedonia. Thessalonica developed into a major commercial port and military launching point. At the time that 2 Thessalonians was written, Thessalonica was the capital and the most populous city in Macedonia, boasting over 200,000 people. **FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH AT THESSALONICA:** During Paul's second missionary journey (A.D. 49-52), he and Silas persuaded many in this bustling seaport town to follow Christ. The city's jealous religious leaders incited a riot bringing charges of sedition against Paul and Silas for worshipping Christ over Caesar (Acts 17:5-7). The two men were forced to flee by night to Berea (Acts 17:10).



What's in a name? Sometimes everything. Reputations are attached to our names, as well as expectations. Perhaps when you were younger and more rambunctious, you recall your parents giving you a warning that went something like this, "Remember who you are. You're a \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in your family name). Conduct yourself accordingly!" Ever heard anything like that before?

Reminding yourself of who you are can keep you on the straight path when you're tempted to stray. It can also bring you comfort when you hurt. Think of the name you bear if you've placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior. You're a "Christian," which means "one who belongs to Christ." What a precious reassurance when you feel wounded and harassed like the Thessalonian believers! You don't belong to this world and its hateful ways; you belong to Christ, who has your life in His hands. You're a Christian!

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:3, *"<sup>3</sup> Clearly you (Christians) are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart."* The NIV says it like this, *"<sup>3</sup> You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."* According to 2 Corinthians 3:3, not only do you belong to Christ, but you are also "a letter of Christ." Perhaps you've never considered that title before. Christ claims you as His own, so your actions should reflect His character. In a very real sense, you are then pen and ink that communicate Christ to the world.

We've been studying a letter from Paul to the Thessalonians, so it's fitting to focus on our lives as being living letters. Let's take a closer look at 2 Corinthians 3:3 and explore what's in the title "letters of Christ."

## ON BEING “LETTER OF CHRIST”

What exactly does it mean to be “letters of Christ”? This reference appears in the context of a debate about Paul’s authority as an apostle and teacher. In Paul’s day, many traveling preachers, evangelists, and prophets circulated throughout Asia Minor. To establish their credentials as authentic ministers of the Gospel, they carried letters of reference with them. However, the charlatans did this as well. In fact, these imposters were known for their lengthy resumes and numerous letters of reference that supposedly gave them the authority to speak for God.

### READ: 2 Corinthians 3:1-3

In **2 Corinthians 3:1**, Paul asked the following rhetorical question regarding whether having a letter like this was necessary for him. Paul wrote, *“Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?”* And then in **verses 2-3**, he responds to his own question, *“<sup>2</sup> You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; <sup>3</sup> clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.”* Paul didn’t need written references because the Corinthians believers themselves were proof of Paul’s ministry. More importantly, they were proof of Christ’s ministry, which was the real source of their transformation.

Every Christian is a living letter... not written with ink or etched on tablets of stone, but a public letter on open display. And the good news is this... you don’t have to preach! All you have to do is live... freely, purely, robustly... as an authentic representative of the King. Wherever you live, wherever you work, wherever you play, you are a living letter of the person of Christ.

We can make a difference, but we must do it God’s way. Something changes inside of us when we are born again (2 Corinthians 5:17). We become children of God, called by His name (John 1:12). What was old passes away, and a new creation comes to be. This inward change is of the utmost importance, but what is not so often emphasized in Christian circles is the reality that our outward behavior ought also to change in response to our decision to follow Christ. There ought to be fruit bringing evidence of a change, for it is by our fruit that we are known (Matthew 7:20). It is rather remarkable that the greatest and most common rebuttal to an invitation to come to church or to become a Christian is that Christians are hypocrites. Now we all do stumble at times, sometimes more severely than others, but if we grant that we are no different than the world, what could possibly interest the unsaved about true Biblical Christianity? Christians are to be fundamentally different (2 Corinthians 6:17). The key is that our difference should be spiritually palpable such that it is convicting, an aroma of life to life for those who believe and of death to those who don’t (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). In other words, it is who we are on the outside because of a new inward reality that can open doors so that we can declare the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). Sadly, the reputation of Christians and churches is very poor, but we can be the difference by faith. God’s Word never changes, so we can still be salt and light. People can still get saved, and how we live can be a means to God creating an open door for the gospel. As **Colossians 4:5** says, *“<sup>5</sup> Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time.”* **What do you think Paul is calling us to here as believers?** Too many preachers and believers make concession to the helplessness of the hypocrisy of Christians, and, in so doing, snuff out the light that the church ought to be shining. There is to be a difference... some “distinguishing” marks of a true believer, and the unsaved should see it, sense it, and know it. This is God’s plan and design,

and thus we must take how we live as believers seriously for the sake of the lost... there must and are some distinguishing marks of Christian. We must make no mistake that the unbeliever is watching us. God has wired unbelievers such that they do watch us whether or not they even realize it. The proof is in the Scriptures that follow. Here are five major ways given in the New Testament that a person can identify a believer... five distinguishing marks that we find in Scripture that characterize the life of a true and genuine believer/Christian. Now, of course there are more if we start going through the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), for example, but these five are more than enough to start etching the importance of how we live upon our hearts. These are some of the Scriptural distinguishing marks.

### **5 Scriptural distinguishing marks of true Christians:**

1. **Love** - First, believers can be identified by their love. Jesus, Himself, said in John 13:34-35, *“<sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”* All men, believers and unbelievers, will be able to identify a true follower of Christ by their love for other believers and for unbelievers. **Love is a distinguishing mark of the Christian.** When we fail to love, we confuse the world and encourage them to stay blinded and enslaved to the evil one. When we practice love, light shines into darkness, whether they fully understand it or not and whether they receive it or not. Scripture makes it clear that love is of God and that those who love are those who are born of God. The world cannot love as God loves because they don't know God. The Love Chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, describes this kind of love... “apape” love... as a kind of divine love that may only be lived out through a believer who has the divine in him or her through a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ who truly lived this kind of love. Only genuine Christians can truly love like this, and surely will as a mark of their faith and salvation. It is known and lived out only by those who are really believes. Only believers can have a true, selfless care for one another that the world doesn't offer or even care to consider. The world looks for how things will benefit themselves, while Christlike love distinguishes Christians because it looks not for personal benefit but for the benefit of others. As **Philippians 2:4-5** says it, *“<sup>4</sup> Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”* That is a remarkable kind of love that marks the life of a Christian.
2. **Unity** - Unity is another Biblical characteristic by which believers are distinguished from the world in which they live. Jesus prays in **John 17:20-21** regarding His disciples and all who would come after them through their testimony, *“<sup>20</sup> I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; <sup>21</sup> that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”* If true Christian unity is seen among believers, then the world might believe that the Father sent the Son to earth. In an age where people believe almost anything, Christian unity cuts to the core of the matter, giving the greatest evidence that Jesus really did come to earth and die for the sins of the world. The world knows that people are evil, untrustworthy, and difficult to get along with. When believers actually get along with one another, this is strong evidence for the legitimacy of the Christian faith. ***What problem might this pose for Christians, Christianity, and the church today? We so often don't get along. The world see us fighting, dividing, church splits, denominational difference and bad-mouthing, etc. What***

*effect might this be having on a lost and watching world (on unbelievers) around us and why do you think that is the case?*

3. **Holiness** - Holiness, which represents the summation of all Christian virtues, is clearly God's design for the believer in practical day to day living. Hebrews 12:14 says, *"<sup>14</sup> Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord."* That tells us that no one will see God without holiness on the part of the believer. Peter writes, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and in God's inspired and infallible Word, in 1 Peter 1:13-16, *"<sup>13</sup> Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; <sup>14</sup> as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; <sup>15</sup> but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, <sup>16</sup> because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'"* Believers/Christians can not get away from the clear call in Scripture to holiness. It should be a most distinguishing mark for a Christian. But the question that may play in the minds of many "Christians" is "What does that look like for me?" What does it mean to be holy for me?" I really don't know if that is a legitimate question or convenient way of putting off the living of it... a sort of excuse packed in side of things like; "What is sin for you may not be sin for me!" or "Just because something is wrong for you doesn't mean it is for me!" or "That is a grey area for me!" or "We are living in a different time! That is accepted today!" You get it. Listen, I don't think it is controversially at what God is calling us to in "holiness." I just think sometimes we want to be more complex than it is! Today, Christian's need to recognize sin as "sin," and call it such and separate themselves from it. Confess it! Repent of it as soon as God's Spirit convicts you of it. We need to live holy, set apart lives for Him. And His Word tells us how. Our conduct must be righteous, or unbelievers will struggle to see how we are any different and why they should believe in the Jesus we claim to follow in word but not in deed.
4. **Good works** - True faith has works that follow (James 2:17). Matthew 5:16 says, *"<sup>16</sup> Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."* tells us simply, that if we do good works for others that some people just might come to glorify God because they see the Light of Christ in us. There are all sorts of kind things that we can do for others... random acts of kindness, caring for a neighbor in need, visiting a senior or shut-in, sending cards and letters to the hurting of struggling, feeding the hungry, giving to the needs in other ways. We cannot solve all of the world's problems ourselves in one fell swoop, but we can be part of the change that the world needs by meeting a need and doing something kind for someone. People know that it is not natural for someone to go out of their way to do something nice for another human being, so they do take note when Christians do something that is otherwise out of the ordinary.
5. **Hope** - Fifthly, 1 Peter 3:15 says, *"<sup>15</sup> But sanctify (set apart, again 'be holy') the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear."* People ought to mark/note something in your that might cause them to see a "hope-filled life" and cause them to ask about why we have so much hope, presuming, of course, that they can see that we are hopeful people. Is there something supernatural (Christ) sustaining us that the world must have no natural explanation for? If there is and if it is visible and tangible, we should anticipate that God will open a door for us to share about the reason for our hope. Paul write in Romans 5:1-5, *"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation*



*produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> and perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*” Three times in those 5 verses that Paul uses to describe the life of a person who has been genuinely saved (justified through Christ), he uses the word “hope.” We can’t escape it “hope”... a life filled with hope, lived in hope, expressing hope, exuding hope, is a clear distinguishing mark of a believer. Christians ought not to be doom-and-gloom, all is lost, down in the mouth, everything is going to pot kind of people (although some are... there are way too many down in the mouth, defeated, negative, everything is bad church people... I don’t know what that means, but it could mean that something is missing in that life... like Jesus... they may not be truly regenerated/transformed believers).

Let us pray that love, unity, good works, holiness, and hope would so saturate our lives that others would take notice. May we be the kind of believer that Paul describes in *Colossians 4:5-6, “<sup>5</sup> Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. <sup>6</sup> Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.”* May God give us grace to answer boldly as we speak of Christ, the reason for our new and very different life.

### A FITTING CONCLUSION

As living letters, we reflect the Lord... from the truth of His words to the grace of His penmanship. Like handwriting fills a page, Jesus fills us. Although people cannot see the Author, they can see His words and feel their impact. They can touch the pages of our lives and feel His heartbeat, His presence. And His presence in our lives is never as visible as when we demonstrate peace in all our circumstances.

Listen again to Paul’s benediction to these believers at Thessalonica and let’s think about what he is saying in these powerful closing words. Here is Paul in closing out this powerful little letter of 2 Thessalonians, *“<sup>16</sup> Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you all. <sup>17</sup> The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is a sign in every <sup>18</sup>epistle; so I write. <sup>18</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.” -2 Thessalonians 3:16-18 (NKJV)*

### 3 parts to Paul’s benediction:

1. **The believer’s peace and the Lord’s presence (2 Thessalonians 3:16)** – Now Paul’s final words to the Thessalonians beginning verse 16... notice it there, *“<sup>16</sup> Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you all.”* Christ’s promise of peace to His followers/disciples forms the basis for Paul’s assurance to the Thessalonians... and by implication even to us today as believers. Before He died, the Prince of Peace, Himself, comforted His disciples with these words of great comfort and help in *John 14:27, “<sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”* Even in their crucible of suffering, the Thessalonian believers had full access to the presence of Christ and, through His presence, His peace. The same peace that Christ experienced on His dark journey to the cross, He offers to His followers in their own pathways of pain. Demonstrating the peace of Christ during suffering stands out like bold print on a page, drawing the eyes of all who examine our lives. This peace provides bold proof of the Author of our faith.

Christ's peace is important to us both personally and interpersonally. In his subsequent letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote in Colossians 3:15, *"<sup>15</sup> And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful."* The context was the theme of "unity in the church." Paul urged the believers to display compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience toward each other as he says in the verses leading up to Colossians 3:15 in verses 12-14, *"<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. <sup>14</sup> But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection."* He encouraged them to forgive one another and to show love, *"... which is the bond of perfection (or unity as some translations have it)."*

The volatile conflict in the Thessalonian body regarding the lazy Christians who had quit working to wait for the Lord could have splintered the church with explosive arguments and insults. When Paul referred to the Lord granting them peace... *"<sup>16</sup> Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way..."* Surely he had in mind this powder-keg situation.

In the Thessalonian conflict, Christ's peace as like an arbiter or referee that brought rule and order. And His peace can bring calm and control to our conflicts as well.

2. **The Apostle's mark (2 Thessalonians 3:17)** – Up to this point, Paul used an "amanuensis," a secretary who took dictation, to write his letter. But when he came to his concluding remarks, he took the pen to write in his own hand. Notice it in verse 17, *"<sup>17</sup> The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is a sign in every <sup>to</sup>epistle; so I write."*

In doing this, writing by his own hand, Paul gave the letter an indisputable mark of genuineness. This ancient procedure of writing autographic conclusions to dictated letters gave proof of the letters authenticity... and also its authority. The custom is similar to how we might sign our name or jot down a short personal note at the end of a letter typewritten by a secretary or stenographer. *Why would Paul do this? He didn't want these believers to question or doubt the powerful words of this letter. And we shouldn't either. We need to understand that God's Word... all of it (including 1 & 2 Thessalonian) is the authoritative Word of God for our lives and should be lived out.*

3. **The Lord's grace (2 Thessalonians 3:18)** – We, as living letters, have the "distinguishing mark" of Jesus Christ. Like the distinctive handwriting on the Declaration of Independence, the Lord puts His "John Hancock" on our lives. That distinguishing mark is God's grace. And it is with this thought that Paul concludes the letter in verse 18... notice it there, *"<sup>18</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."* It is the quality of graciousness that transforms our living letters into more treasured correspondence – love letters.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Let's close our study by pondering the question, "What distinguishing mark has the Lord left on our lives as believers?" There are not clones in the body of Christ. Not two believers are exactly alike. God has graced each of us with our own unique qualities and abilities. What can you

contribute to the body of Christ? Perhaps by exercising your spiritual gift of teaching, serving, evangelizing, or showing mercy, you can leave your distinguishing mark on others' lives... the signature of Christ!

### **A final reminder of some of the common distinguishing marks of Christians:**

These truths (distinguishing marks) have been sprinkled throughout Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Let's resate them this way... these are clear and common marks that characterize or distinguish the life of a Christians...

1. **Christians are like Christ** – Romans 8:28-29 is familiar enough to us, and often quoted, but it also tells us what distinguishes us as Christian... we are little "Christs," we are to reflect Him, to be like Him. Romans 8:28-29 says, *"<sup>28</sup> And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. <sup>29</sup> For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren."* We are to be conformed to the image of Christ. *What does it mean to be "conformed" to the image of His Son?*
2. **Christians are not like the world** – Not only are we to conform to the image of Jesus... to be like Him (Jesus), but Scripture also tells us that a distinguishing mark of a genuine believer is that he or she no longer "conforms"... looks like the world. Romans 12:1-2 says it, *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. <sup>2</sup> And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."* ... do not conform to the world, but be transformed. *What does it mean, in your mind, to not be "conformed" to the world?*
3. **Christians are uniquely like Christ** – Believers are distinguished by the fact that they are like Christ reflecting Him, but no two Christians are exactly alike. What that mean for us to be "like Christ" does not mean that we are all rubber stamp Christians. We are not robot, carbon-copy Christians. Each Christian is uniquely like Chris. Ephesians 2:10 says, *"<sup>10</sup> For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."* He set the members in the body just as it pleased Him. 1 Corinthians 12:18-19 says it, *"<sup>18</sup> But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. <sup>19</sup> And if they were all one member, where would the body be?"* And on down, a little later Paul would say in verses 27-30 (1 Corinthians 12), *"<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. <sup>28</sup> And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?"* Each believer is unique yet like Christ.
4. **Christians are to live out our faith** – We are to be doers of the word and not hears only (deceiving ourselves) as James says in James 1:22, *"<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."* In other words we are to live our out faith, not just profess it. Remember Jesus words in Matthew 7:20-23, *"<sup>20</sup> Therefore by their fruits (they life they live...living our their faith) you will know them. <sup>21</sup> "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' <sup>23</sup> And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"*



5. **Christians lives are to be characterized by love** – John writes in 1 John 3:10, “<sup>10</sup> *In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.*” And a little later in 1 John 3:18-19, “<sup>8</sup> *My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.* <sup>19</sup> *And by this we <sup>19</sup>know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.*” And John would even tell us in 1 John 4:7-8, whoever does not love does not know Christ... “<sup>7</sup> *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.* <sup>8</sup> *He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*”

These clear distinguishing marks should be a tell-tale sign of sure faith, and genuine Christianity as Biblical described. The Thessalonians believers had these marks, and so must we give evidence.