



SERMON TITLE: "Epistemology and Eternal Life"

DATE: February 14, 2021

SCRIPTURE: John 17:3

PASTOR: Jim Thompson

---

## SERIES SUMMARY

"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

---

Epistemology. Maybe that's a new word for you. It's the study of how we know things. Epistemology considers the sources, reliability, and origin of knowledge. It considers the strange dance of certainty and perception and experience. For example, how do you know that you were born in September? Do you remember it? Did you have consciousness at the time? No. Someone has convinced you that you were born in September. So, how reliable are the sources that convinced you of that? And why do you trust them?

Actually, we do epistemology every day without thinking about it. We are more and less confident that we know certain things. "I know the answer to this question. I know I can make it to a gas station in time. I know she likes me. I know I'll get the job. I know I can have self-control. I know I won't get caught." And you may be right on a lot of these. But, what if you didn't get the question or the job? What if you *did* get caught? That means that the reality upon which you based your knowledge was faulty.

Epistemology doesn't mean that we can't trust anything, nothing is real, and that knowledge is an illusion. Rather, it should encourage us to examine the sources of our knowledge. We should have epistemological curiosity. If we're going to be thoughtful and faithful "knowers," we need the confidence that comes from patient inspection. And when we think about epistemology as it relates to God, we are presented with one of, if not *the*, most basic human question: How can I know God? People ask this question dozens of different ways: Is there a God to know? How can we know? What's he like? How can we experience his presence, his character, and his love? These questions are far more significant than the little tidepools of epistemology that we often splash around in. This question about knowing towers above every other: What does it mean to know God?

The night that Jesus was arrested before he went to the cross, he prayed. And his prayer was for his people, specifically that we would grasp and answer this question. And so, in John 17:3, Jesus gives us a great starting point to our answer: "This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Let's consider three parts of this verse as a way to think about what it means to know God: eternal life, knowing, and who should be known.

FIRST, when Jesus prays about "eternal life," he's not talking about a boring and endless succession of moments. He's also not really talking about going to heaven when you die. The point of the Bible is not that we should leave earth because it's so bad and evil. The point of the Bible is that because earth is so bad and evil, God brought heaven to earth in Jesus. God made heaven and earth to be together (Genesis 1:1). But because of our sin, humanity was separated from God. Humanity's space is called earth, and God's space is called heaven. Throughout the Old Testament, God promised Israel that this separation would not always be so, but that one day heaven and earth would be one again. So, when we get to the book of John, and we see the phrase "eternal life" used 17 times, each time it's talking about how heaven and earth have begun to overlap is Jesus. Or, put simply:

In John, "eternal life" means life the way God intended, available now and without an expiration date.

And we are all seeking after eternal life in different ways. When an addict is looking for a fix, he's looking to feel eternal life. When an alcoholic needs a drink, she's thirsty for eternal life. When pornography feels like a need, it's a longing for eternal life. When a legalist is judging everybody but themselves, they're aching for eternal life. If you add up everything you want, everything you're pursuing, everything that you're trying to make happen on your own, at the very bottom of it all, you're after this idea of eternal life. And we all try to do our own version of real life without God. That's what sin is in the Bible. But God's love is too kind and too strong to watch us amuse ourselves to death, and this is why heaven has come to earth – eternal life, life the way God intended.

SECOND, "This is eternal life is that they *know*." Jesus is praying that we would experience the life of heaven-come-to-earth, and that we would do so by the act of knowing. But there's an important distinction here. This is where epistemology matters. Our modern definition of the knowing is about factual data, as in, "I know that the Bucs won the Super Bowl." But that's not how the Bible talks about knowing.

In Scripture, knowing can include information, but it's more about relationship and experience. Consider Genesis 4 when "Adam knew Eve, and then bore a son." That's about relationship, experience, and intimacy. And beyond this, every act of knowing is also an act of trust. This is why John also says that eternal life happens by believing (John 3:16, etc). Knowing and trusting are both about relationship, and not awareness of details. This further means that the life God wants for us doesn't happen by our achieving, our accolades, or our accomplishments. We shouldn't bring our resumés before God trying to impress him, because they're filled with stats about us. Rather, the eternal life we want and need happens through relationship, specifically relationship with "the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent."

THIRD, eternal life comes by relationship, but with who? With "the only true God, and Jesus Christ." Here, God being the "only true God" seems to imply we set up other gods that we think will give us life, and that they always end up being lies. But there's something different about the Father, the Creator God of Israel. And there's also an "and." We're supposed to know the "only true God *and* Jesus Christ that he has sent."

If you read all of John, you know that Jesus is somehow mysteriously God-in-the-flesh. He is also *the way* that we know God. He is the final answer to our question, "What does it mean to know God?" So, the way that we are meant to experience life the way God wants, both now and forever, is that we have a trusting friendship with Jesus. Minimally, it means you're on great speaking terms with him. He wants us to speak to him in prayer, and tell him all that we're feeling and thinking. And he speaks to us in Scripture; it's the word of God for the people of God. We should praise him and plead to him in worship, and he communicates to us through his Holy Spirit, his people, and through creation. This is part of what it means to know him. It's not a science, it's a patient relationship. This is what Jesus wants for us as he prays in John 17.

Proverbs 3 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your path straight." This means, "In all your ways, seek to *know* him." Eternal life includes trusting God, and seeking to experience him in every corner and crevice of life. And so, one of the practical questions is, "Why am I sometimes so consumed with the temporal more than the eternal?" Or, "If knowing God intimately is the only thing on the horizon of my eternity, then why do I still flirt with fleeting and trivial things as much as I do?"

As followers of Jesus, our focus should be on the glorious and nuanced ways in which the kingdom of heaven has come to earth in him. How has eternal life already started because of him? What does it mean to live eternal life now, and hold out the hope of eternal life to others? These are the questions that should fill our mind. And to do that, sometimes we need to cut ties with worldly things that dominate our hearts that we know won't last. This is part of Jesus' prayer for us. Eternal life means that we can no longer settle for the mortal and the mundane when The Immortal and The Majestic gave his life for us. And doing this requires faith, dependence, humility, and knowing that he is trustworthy because knows more fully and purely than we do.

Broadly, John 17:3 presents us with the most wonderful thing in the entire universe: "Jesus Christ whom he has sent." This sending is about Jesus coming from heaven to earth, and then to the cross. Jesus' going to the cross means that he willingly stands in our place to take on the death we deserve because of our sin. His death is to free us from the bondage of guilt and shame that weigh us down. He became the separation we deserve, that we might be brought close to and know the Father. When Jesus stretched out his arms to die, he was making Eternal Life possible. And no matter where you are in your life of faith, John's gospel is plain: Jesus is what God is like. Jesus is how we can understand God's character and his love. Because of him, humbly and confidently knowing God is possible. This is good news.

---

### Discussion Starters

1. Personally, what stood out to you the most in this message or passage?
2. Who is someone that you know that knows God intimately like Jesus is praying about?
3. How is our modern understanding of "knowing" different from the Bible's understanding of "knowing"?
4. What does "eternal life" mean in John's gospel?
5. When and why is it hard to talk to people about knowing God?
6. What are things that keep you from knowing God in a practical way?
7. If knowing God includes, being on good speaking terms with him, what should that look like in your life?