

The Books of 1, 2, and 3 John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: Keeping His Commandments; Knowing Him

1 John 2:3-17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage establishes the great theme that genuine knowledge of God is inseparable from obedience to God. John is countering a religion of claims without conduct, the boast of knowing God by those who ignore His word. The teacher should make clear that this is not salvation by works; it is the truth that a living faith obeys, that those who truly know God keep His commandments, and that love for God is proven and perfected in keeping His word. Set alongside this is the central command, love one another, presented as both old and new, and the sober warning that we cannot walk in the light while hating a brother.

The second half of the passage raises the doctrine of the world and the affections of the heart. John defines worldliness not mainly as a list of forbidden places but as a disordered love: the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life. The teacher should help students see that the issue is the direction of the heart, and that two loves, love of the world and love of the Father, cannot coexist. The world is passing away; the one who does God's will abides forever.

The formational aim is to move students from a religion measured by feelings and activity to a faith measured by obedient love, and to expose the quiet worldliness that competes with love for God. Many believers have never honestly asked where their hearts actually rest. This lesson should send them home having examined their loves and recommitted to walking as Jesus walked.

Question 1

Student Question:

John says, "By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments" (v. 3). What does this teach us about the relationship between truly knowing God and obeying Him, and what does it expose about a faith that claims to know God but ignores His word?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John gives a test for the most important relationship in existence. How can we know we truly know God? Not by the intensity of an experience but by a life that keeps His commandments. Knowledge of God and obedience to God are bound together; you cannot have the first without the second.

Be careful to state this rightly so no one hears salvation by works. John is not saying we earn a relationship with God by obeying. He is saying that those who genuinely know God show it by obedience, just as a healthy tree shows its life by its fruit. Obedience is the evidence, not the purchase price, of knowing God.

Then let verse 4 land with its full weight. The one who says “I know him” but does not keep His commandments “is a liar, and the truth is not in him.” John will not allow a divorce between profession and practice. A claimed faith that leaves the life untouched is not weak faith; it is false faith.

Apply this to the way we measure our walk with God. We are prone to assess ourselves by feelings, by how moved we were in worship, by how much we know. John gives a more reliable gauge: are we keeping His word? Help students welcome this as a mercy, a clear test that can free us from the endless uncertainty of feelings.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine knowledge of God evidenced by obedience (not earned by it)
- Living faith versus a false faith that claims much and obeys little (James 2:14–26)
- Obedience as the fruit and proof of knowing God
- The unreliability of feelings as the primary measure of our walk with God

Discussion Prompts

- How is obedience the evidence of knowing God without being the way we earn salvation?
- Why does John call the disobedient professor a liar rather than a weak believer?
- How might measuring our walk by obedience rather than feelings actually free us?

Question 2

Student Question:

John says that in the one who keeps God’s word, “truly the love of God is perfected” (v. 5). Think honestly about your own obedience: do you obey God mostly out of fear or duty, or is your obedience growing into genuine love? What would help it grow?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves obedience from a cold category to a matter of the heart. John says that in those who keep God’s word, the love of God reaches its goal, is brought to maturity. Obedience is meant to be the expression of love, and through obedience our love itself grows up.

Help students examine their motives honestly. Much obedience begins in fear or duty, and that is not all bad; even reluctant obedience is better than rebellion. But God means to mature us beyond it. As we obey and taste His goodness, duty warms into delight, and we begin to keep His word because we love Him, not only because we must.

Point to the path of growth. Love for God grows as we know Him better, as we remember what He has done for us in Christ, and, paradoxically, as we obey. We often wait to feel love before we obey; God often gives the love through the obeying. Action and affection feed each other.

Encourage patience and honesty. No one's love is yet perfect. The question is direction. Is your obedience slowly becoming more glad, more free, more loving? Name one practice, dwelling on the gospel, prayer, grateful remembrance, that would warm duty into love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience as the expression of love, not mere external compliance
- The maturing (perfecting) of love through keeping God's word
- The progression from fear and duty toward delight in obedience
- The mutual reinforcement of love and obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Is your obedience mostly fear, duty, or love right now? Be honest.
- How does remembering the gospel warm cold obedience into love?
- What practice might help your obedience grow more glad and free?

Question 3

Student Question:

John says, "whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (v. 6). What does it mean to walk as Jesus walked, and why is the life of Christ, and not merely our own ideas of goodness, the pattern for the Christian?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

To abide in Christ is to remain in living union with Him, and John says such abiding has a visible shape: we walk as Jesus walked. The Christian life is not self-styled spirituality but conformity to the actual life of Jesus, His humility, obedience, compassion, holiness, and self-giving love.

Stress why Christ, and not our own notions of goodness, is the standard. Left to ourselves we each define goodness to fit our preferences, usually flattering our strengths and excusing our weaknesses. Jesus gives us a fixed, true pattern outside ourselves. We do not get to invent the Christian life; we follow His steps.

Walk the class through what Jesus' way actually looked like: obedience to the Father, time in prayer, mercy to the broken, courage with the proud, purity, and a love that went all the way to the cross. To claim His name is to commit to that road.

Guard against discouragement. Walking as Jesus walked is the work of a lifetime and the fruit of His Spirit in us, not a standard we meet by gritted effort alone. But the call is real, and abiding in

Him is what makes it possible. The branch that remains in the vine bears the fruit of the vine's own life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Abiding in Christ expressed in Christlike living
- The life of Jesus as the fixed pattern for the believer, against self-defined goodness
- Discipleship as following the actual steps of Christ (1 Peter 2:21)
- Christlikeness as the fruit of abiding, not merely of self-effort

Discussion Prompts

- What specific traits of Jesus' walk most challenge your own?
- Why are our own ideas of goodness an unreliable standard?
- Where do you most need to follow Jesus' steps rather than your own preferences?

Question 4

Student Question:

John speaks of loving and hating our brother as the test of whether we are walking in the light (vv. 9–11). Is there a brother or sister you are holding in your heart at arm's length, with resentment or coldness? What is that revealing, and what does Christ call you to do about it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John makes a startling claim: the one who says he is in the light while hating his brother is still in darkness. He gives us no room to separate our love for God from our love for one another. Coldness toward a brother is not a minor relational flaw; it is a spiritual warning light.

Help students examine their relationships honestly. Most of us are holding someone at arm's length: an old grievance, a quiet resentment, a person we have written off. We rarely call it hatred, but John's categories are sharper than ours. The absence of love is itself the problem he names.

Then point to the action Christ calls for. This is not about manufacturing warm feelings but about choosing the path of love: forgiveness, prayer for the person, a move toward reconciliation, the refusal to nurse the grudge. Love is first a commitment and a set of actions, and feelings often follow.

Note John's sober warning in verse 11: the one who hates walks in darkness and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him. Unaddressed resentment does not stay contained; it spreads into the whole soul. The call is to bring it into the light now.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love for the brethren as the test of walking in the light
- Hatred and coldness as marks of spiritual darkness
- Love as commitment and action, not merely feeling
- The blinding, spreading effect of unaddressed resentment
- The call to forgiveness and reconciliation (Matthew 5:23–24; Ephesians 4:31–32)

Discussion Prompts

- Whom are you holding at arm's length, and what is that revealing about your walk?
- What is the difference between feeling warmth toward someone and choosing to love them?
- What concrete step toward reconciliation is Christ calling you to take?

Question 5

Student Question:

John calls the command to love one another both an “old commandment” and “a new commandment” (vv. 7–8). In what sense is it old, and in what sense has Jesus made it new, and how does His coming change what love among God’s people looks like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John seems to contradict himself, calling the command both old and new, but the tension is intentional and rich. It is old because the call to love is not novel; it was there from the beginning, woven through the law and the prophets, and the readers had it from the start of their faith.

It is new in at least two ways. First, Jesus gave it fresh content and a new measure: love one another “as I have loved you” (John 13:34). The cross redefined love, setting a height no one had seen before. Second, it is new in power, for in Christ a new people has been created in whom this love can actually flourish. John says “the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.”

Help students feel the difference Christ makes. Before, love was a command pressing on us from outside. In Christ, love becomes the family resemblance of a people indwelt by His Spirit, modeled by His own self-giving. The standard rises (love as Jesus loved) and the resource arrives (the life of Christ in us).

Apply it to the church. The love Jesus commands is the visible sign by which the world is meant to recognize His disciples (John 13:35). It is not vague goodwill toward humanity but concrete, sacrificial love among the brethren, shaped by the cross.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The continuity of God’s call to love (old) with its fresh content and power in Christ (new)

- The cross as the new measure of love: as I have loved you (John 13:34)
- The new community in which Christlike love becomes possible
- Love among the brethren as the mark of discipleship before the world (John 13:35)

Discussion Prompts

- How does the cross redefine what love means for us?
- Why is love among Christians meant to be visible to the watching world?
- Where does your love for the brethren need to rise to the measure of Christ's love?

Question 6

Student Question:

John addresses children, fathers, and young men at different stages of spiritual maturity (vv. 12–14). Where are you in that picture right now, and what is the next step of growth God is calling you to take?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John pauses to address his readers in three figures that suggest stages of spiritual maturity: little children who know the Father and have forgiveness, young men who are strong and have overcome the evil one, and fathers who know Him who is from the beginning. There is a progression here from the assurance of forgiveness, to strength in spiritual battle, to deep, settled knowledge of God.

Invite students to locate themselves honestly, without shame at being young in the faith or pride at being mature. Some in the room are new and need above all to rest in forgiveness and learn the Father's love. Some are in the thick of spiritual warfare and need the word of God to remain strong. Some are seasoned and are called to the deep, durable knowledge of God that anchors others.

Stress that the Christian life is meant to grow. None of these stages is a place to stop. The forgiven child is meant to become a strong young soldier; the soldier is meant to become a seasoned father in the faith. Stagnation is not an option John entertains.

Help each person name a next step appropriate to their stage. For the young: grounding in basic assurance and Scripture. For the strong: deepening the word that gives victory. For the mature: pouring their knowledge into others. Growth always has a next step.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Stages of spiritual maturity in the Christian life
- Assurance of forgiveness as the foundation for the young in faith
- Strength for spiritual warfare through the abiding word of God
- Mature, settled knowledge of God and its role in anchoring others

- The expectation of ongoing growth, not stagnation

Discussion Prompts

- Which stage best describes where you are right now?
- What is the specific next step of growth for someone at your stage?
- How can the more mature in the church help the younger grow?

Question 7

Student Question:

John commands, “Do not love the world or the things in the world” (v. 15), yet God “so loved the world” that He sent His Son. How do we make sense of this, and what exactly is the “world” that we must not love?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question resolves an apparent contradiction and defines a key biblical term. When John says God loved the world (John 3:16), “world” means the people God made and longs to save. When John says do not love the world, “world” means something different: the organized system of life in rebellion against God, with its values, cravings, and pride, the whole order that leaves God out.

So Christians are to love people fervently while refusing to love the godless system that enslaves them. We pour ourselves out for the world as God did, even as we refuse to give our hearts to the world’s idols. The two are not in conflict once the terms are clear.

Verse 16 unpacks what this God-excluding world is made of: the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life. These are not three obscure sins but the basic engines of a life turned from God: craving for pleasure, craving for things, and the pride that makes self the center. Help students see how thoroughly these saturate the culture and the heart.

Apply it carefully. Worldliness is less about a checklist of places and more about a set of loves. A person can avoid every forbidden venue and still be deeply worldly in heart, and another can live in the thick of the culture with a heart anchored in the Father. The command targets our affections.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The two senses of “world”: people God loves, and the system in rebellion against Him
- Loving people while refusing to love the godless system
- Worldliness defined as disordered loves (flesh, eyes, pride), not merely external places
- The heart, not just the behavior, as the target of the command

Discussion Prompts

- How can we love people in the world without loving the world's idols?
- Why is worldliness more about our loves than about a list of forbidden things?
- Where does the world's value system most subtly shape your thinking?

Question 8

Student Question:

John says the love of the world and the love of the Father cannot live together in the same heart (v. 15). What is one specific worldly attachment that is quietly crowding out your love for God, and what would it look like to loosen its grip?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John states it starkly: if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. He is not describing two loves that compete for second place; he is saying they cannot share the throne. Whatever we love supremely defines us, and the heart finally serves one master (Matthew 6:24).

This self-examining question asks students to name the rival, not in the abstract but specifically. For one it may be money or possessions, for another comfort or pleasure, for another status, approval, or career. The world's pull is usually not dramatic sin but a good thing loved too much, quietly moving into first place.

Help students discern the symptoms of a divided heart: where their thoughts drift in idle moments, what they fear losing most, what they sacrifice for and what they will not sacrifice. These reveal where love actually rests, beneath what we claim.

Then point toward loosening the grip. This is rarely a single dramatic act; it is reordering loves over time, often by giving the idol away, by generosity, by spiritual disciplines that re-center the heart on God, and by honest accountability. The goal is not a joyless stripping away but a heart freed to love the Father first.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The impossibility of supreme love for both the world and the Father
- Idolatry as good things loved too much, taking God's place
- Discerning the heart's true loves by its fears, drifts, and sacrifices
- Reordering of loves through repentance, generosity, and spiritual discipline

Discussion Prompts

- What good thing in your life is most in danger of taking first place?
- What do your idle thoughts and your deepest fears reveal about your loves?
- What is one concrete way to loosen that attachment this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

John exposes the world as “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life,” all of which “is passing away” (vv. 16–17). Why is it foolish to give our hearts to what is passing away, and how does setting our love on doing the will of God change the whole direction of a life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, gathering the passage into a contrast between two destinies. John says the world and its desires are passing away. Everything the godless system offers, every pleasure, possession, and applause, is temporary by its very nature. To build a life on it is to build on sand that is already sliding into the sea.

Set against this is the one who does the will of God, who “abides forever.” Here John lifts the whole question to the level of eternity. The issue is not merely that worldly loves are sinful but that they are doomed; they cannot last, and they cannot satisfy. To pour our one life into what is passing is the deepest folly, however reasonable it looks now.

Draw out the doctrine of the will of God as the durable center of a life. The will of God is not a vague ideal but His revealed purpose in Christ, made known in His word. A life ordered around doing that will, loving God, loving the brethren, walking as Jesus walked, obeying His commands, is the only life that outlasts death. This is also where our heritage rightly insists that faith is a living, obedient faith: it is the one who does the will of God, not merely the one who admires it, who abides.

Apply it as a reorientation of the whole self. When a person genuinely believes that the world is passing and the will of God abides forever, everything changes: how they spend money and time, what they pursue, how they face suffering and death. The values invert. What the world calls loss can be gain, and what the world calls gain can be loss.

Land it on the heart with hope, not just warning. To do the will of God is not a grim trade of present joy for future safety. It is to attach our love to what is real and lasting, to the Father Himself, and so to find a joy the passing world could never give. The one who does His will abides forever, held by the God who is forever.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The transient nature of the world and all its desires
- The permanence of the one who does the will of God (eternal perspective)
- Living, obedient faith: the one who does God’s will, not merely admires it, abides
- The will of God as His revealed purpose in Christ, known through His word
- The reordering of all of life around what is eternal rather than what is passing

- The folly of investing an eternal soul in temporary things (Mark 8:36)

Discussion Prompts

- What are you tempted to build your life on that is already passing away?
- How would really believing that the world is passing change your daily choices?
- How is doing the will of God a path to lasting joy and not merely future safety?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this passage, from knowing God through obedience, to loving one another, to refusing the love of the world. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you, through this passage, into someone whose love is set on the Father and on doing His will.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks students to gather the passage into one personal step. Trace the movement once more: real knowledge of God shows in obedience; obedience grows into love; love embraces the brethren and refuses the world; and the one who does God's will abides forever. The whole passage is about where our love rests and how it shows.

Press for specificity. For one person the step may be reordering a worldly attachment named earlier. For another it may be reconciling with a brother held at arm's length. For another it may be moving obedience from cold duty toward love, or taking the next step of maturity John described.

Frame this as formation, not mere resolution. The aim is to notice where Christ is already at work shaping our loves, and to cooperate with Him there. Ask not only what they will do, but how they sense Jesus changing what they want.

Close by anchoring them in hope. The same Lord who commands this love also supplies it as we abide in Him. We do not reorder our hearts by willpower alone; we set ourselves before the Father, and He matures our love. The one who does His will abides forever.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Integration of obedience, love for the brethren, and refusal of worldly love
- Spiritual formation as the reordering of our loves toward the Father
- Cooperation with Christ's transforming work rather than mere willpower
- The promise that the one who does God's will abides forever

Discussion Prompts

- Which thread of this passage is Christ pressing on you most: obedience, love for a brother, or refusing the world?
- Where do you sense Jesus already changing what you want?
- What is the one step you will take, and who can help you keep it?