

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

Lesson 6: Love One Another in Deed and Truth

1 John 3:11-24

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage teaches that love for fellow believers is an essential mark of genuine spiritual life, not an optional add-on. John makes love the evidence that we have passed from death to life, and its absence the sign of abiding in death. He defines this love not as sentiment but by the cross of Christ, who laid down His life for us, and therefore as costly, practical, and concrete. The teacher should also handle John's sober equation of hatred with murder, tracing both to their source, and should let verses 23 and 24 draw together the great strands of the letter: believing in the name of Jesus, loving one another, keeping His commandments, answered prayer, and the abiding presence of God through His Spirit.

A doctrinally important note arises in verses 21 to 24, where John ties answered prayer and assurance to keeping God's commandments and to a faith that believes in Christ and loves the brethren. The teacher should present this as the consistent New Testament picture of a living, obedient faith, faith that works through love, never a bare mental assent or a faith only divorced from obedience. At the same time, verses 19 and 20 must be handled pastorally, for John speaks tenderly to the heart that condemns itself, assuring such a heart that God is greater than our heart and knows all things.

Formationally, this lesson aims to move students from talking about love to practicing it, and to expose the cold or closed heart that hides behind orthodox words. The teacher should press the concrete: real love shares food, meets needs, spends itself. And the teacher should offer the passage's deep comfort: that loving in deed and truth is one of the ways God quiets the anxious, self-condemning heart and gives us confidence before Him.

Question 1

Student Question:

John says, "this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another" (v. 11), and contrasts it with Cain (v. 12). What does the example of Cain teach us about the real nature and source of hatred, and where it leads?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John roots the call to love in the very beginning of the gospel message and then sets it against its dark opposite in Cain. The contrast is deliberate: love one another, and do not be like Cain. By reaching back to Genesis 4, John shows that the war between love and hatred is as old as the human family.

Trace the anatomy of hatred in Cain. John says Cain was of the evil one and murdered his brother, and explains the motive: his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Hatred here is not provoked by injury but by the discomfort that goodness creates in an evil heart. The righteousness of Abel exposed Cain, and rather than repent, he destroyed the one who exposed him.

Identify the source. John traces hatred to the evil one. It is not a neutral emotion but belongs to a spiritual lineage opposed to God. This dignifies the call to love by showing what its absence really is: not a small relational failing but a participation in the spirit of Cain.

Show where it leads. Hatred is not static; it moves toward destruction, as it did in Cain. Help students see that cherished resentment does not stay contained. The seed of hatred, left to grow, bears the fruit of harm. This prepares the way for John's startling claim in verse 15 that the one who hates is a murderer.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to love as the gospel message from the beginning
- Hatred traced to its source in the evil one (the spiritual lineage of Cain)
- Goodness provoking hatred in the unrepentant heart (Genesis 4)
- The trajectory of hatred toward destruction

Discussion Prompts

- Why did Cain hate his brother, and what does that reveal about hatred in general?
- How does seeing hatred's true source change how seriously we take it?
- Where can resentment lead if it is cherished rather than confronted?

Question 2

Student Question:

John says we should "not be surprised" that the world hates us (v. 13). When you face misunderstanding or hostility for following Christ, do you respond with bitterness, with self-pity, or with the love John commands? What would change if you expected such opposition?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John prepares his readers not to be caught off guard by the world's hostility. The same dynamic that operated in Cain operates still: the righteous life exposes and provokes. Hostility for following Christ is not a sign that something has gone wrong but, often, a sign that we belong to Him.

Help students examine their actual responses to opposition. Bitterness nurses the wound and returns hostility for hostility. Self-pity curls inward and broods. Both are understandable and both are dead ends. John points instead toward steadfast love, the very thing the world lacks.

Draw out the difference expectation makes. Much of the sting of opposition comes from surprise, from the assumption that the world should welcome us. When we expect that following Christ will sometimes cost us acceptance, we are freed from shock and self-pity and can respond as Christ did, with love rather than retaliation.

Apply it concretely. The coworker who mocks our faith, the family member who resents our convictions, the culture that increasingly dismisses us. The call is not to court hostility or to play the victim, but to meet it with the unsurprised, durable love of those who know whose they are.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The expected hostility of the world toward the righteous (John 15:18–20)
- Bitterness and self-pity as dead-end responses to opposition
- Love rather than retaliation as the Christlike response (Romans 12:17–21)
- Expectation of opposition as freeing from shock and self-pity

Discussion Prompts

- What is your default response to hostility for your faith: bitterness, self-pity, or love?
- How does expecting opposition change the way you experience it?
- Where do you need to meet hostility with love this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

John writes, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers” (v. 14). What does this teach about love for fellow Christians as evidence of genuine spiritual life, and what does the absence of such love reveal?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John offers love for the brethren as a ground of assurance: we know we have passed from death to life because we love. Love for fellow believers is presented as a reliable evidence of the new life, a sign that the resurrection life of Christ is actually at work in us.

Be precise about the logic. John is not saying our love earns the new life; he is saying our love evidences it. Just as a pulse evidences physical life, love for the brethren evidences spiritual life. Where God’s life has come, love for God’s people follows, because we now love what and whom God loves.

Let the negative side speak as well. John adds that the one who does not love abides in death. The absence of love for fellow believers is not a minor deficiency; it raises the question of whether spiritual life is present at all. This is sobering and meant to be.

Apply it as a tool for honest assurance. Believers troubled about their standing can take comfort: a genuine love for God's people, however imperfect, is a real evidence of life. And those who feel no love for the brethren are invited to examine whether they have truly passed from death to life, and to come to Christ afresh.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love for the brethren as evidence (not the cause) of the new life
- The new life in Christ producing love for what God loves
- The absence of love as a sign of abiding in death
- Love for God's people as a ground of honest assurance

Discussion Prompts

- How is love evidence of spiritual life rather than the way we earn it?
- Why should the absence of love for fellow believers concern us deeply?
- How can genuine love for God's people steady a troubled assurance?

Question 4

Student Question:

John says bluntly, "everyone who hates his brother is a murderer" (v. 15). Is there someone you have written off, resented, or quietly wished ill toward? How does Jesus' standard expose the condition of your heart toward that person?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John echoes the teaching of Jesus, who traced murder back to the anger and contempt of the heart (Matthew 5:21-22). The equation is jarring on purpose: hatred is murder in seed form, sharing the same root and the same lineage as Cain's violence, even when it never lifts a hand.

Use this to expose the respectable forms of hatred we excuse. Most of us would never strike someone, but we write people off, harbor resentment, savor their failures, and quietly wish them ill. John refuses to let us call these harmless. They are the inner reality of which murder is the outer fruit.

Help students name the specific person without rushing to self-justification. The very instinct to explain why our coldness is deserved is part of what John is exposing. The standard is not whether our resentment feels justified but whether love is present.

Point to the way out. The remedy for the murderous heart is not mere willpower but the love defined in the next verses, the cross of Christ received and then extended. We forgive because we have been forgiven; we love because He first loved us. Invite students to bring the named person before God and begin, by grace, to replace resentment with love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hatred as murder of the heart (Matthew 5:21-22)
- The respectable forms of hatred we excuse: contempt, resentment, writing people off
- Self-justification as part of the heart's deception
- The cross as the source and pattern of the love that replaces hatred

Discussion Prompts

- Whom have you written off or quietly resented?
- How does Jesus' standard expose the heart behind our respectable coldness?
- How does being forgiven at the cross free us to forgive and love that person?

Question 5

Student Question:

John defines love by the cross: "by this we know love, that he laid down his life for us" (v. 16). How does the cross redefine what love actually is, over against the way our culture defines love as mainly a feeling or an affirmation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John gives love its definition, and he locates it not in our hearts but at the cross. We know what love is by looking at Christ laying down His life for us. Love is defined by God's action in Christ, not by our culture's shifting notions.

Contrast this with the common cultural definition. Today love is often reduced to a warm feeling or to unconditional affirmation, agreeing with whatever someone wants and feels. The cross redefines love as self-giving for the true good of another, even at great cost, even when it is not comfortable or affirming. Christ's love sought our salvation, not our mere happiness.

Draw out the costliness. The cross shows that real love lays something down: comfort, rights, even life. This is the opposite of a love that asks nothing and costs nothing. John immediately applies it: we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. Cross-shaped love spends itself.

Apply it to discernment. Because love is defined by the cross, we can test our culture's claims about love. Love that affirms a person into destruction is not the love of Christ. Love that seeks another's true and eternal good, even at cost to ourselves, is. The cross is our measure.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cross as the definition of love (self-giving for another's true good)
- Love as costly action, not mere feeling or affirmation
- The contrast between Christlike love and the culture's definition of love
- The cross as the measure by which we test claims about love

Discussion Prompts

- How does the cross redefine love over against feeling or affirmation?
- Why is affirming someone into harm not the same as loving them?
- What does it mean that real love always lays something down?

Question 6

Student Question:

John asks how God's love can abide in someone who sees a brother in need and "closes his heart against him" (v. 17). When did you last truly see a need you could meet, and what keeps your heart open or closed in those moments?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John moves from the cross to the everyday. Few of us will be asked to die for a brother, but all of us encounter brothers and sisters in ordinary need, and our response reveals whether the love of God truly abides in us. The grand definition of love proves itself in mundane generosity.

Notice the two parts John names: seeing the need, and having the means to meet it. He pictures someone who has the world's goods, sees a brother in need, and yet closes his heart. The failure is not inability but unwillingness, a heart shut against a need it could meet.

Help students examine what closes the heart. Often it is preoccupation, so we do not truly see; sometimes it is self-protection, fear of being used, or a grip on our resources. John's question is searching: how does God's love abide in such a heart? Love that sees and can act but will not is not the love of God.

Move toward the open heart. Encourage students to recall a recent need they could have met, and to notice what happened in their hearts. The aim is not guilt but a softened, attentive heart that genuinely sees and is willing to spend itself, trusting the God who supplies all we need.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love proven in practical generosity toward the needy brother
- The closed heart (unwillingness, not inability) as evidence against God's love abiding
- Seeing the need and having the means as the components of responsibility
- Generosity as the fruit of God's love genuinely abiding in us

Discussion Prompts

- When did you last truly see a need you could meet? What did you do?
- What tends to close your heart in those moments?
- What would a genuinely open, attentive heart look like for you?

Question 7

Student Question:

John urges, “let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (v. 18). What does this teach about the difference between professed love and practiced love, and why does God insist that real love show up in concrete action?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John draws a sharp line between two kinds of love: love in word and talk, and love in deed and truth. Words of love are cheap and easily offered; deeds of love are costly and verify the words. John insists that real love is the latter, love made visible in action.

Explain why God insists on this. Words alone can deceive both others and ourselves; we can feel loving and warm without ever lifting a finger. Deeds cannot be faked in the same way. Love in deed and truth is love that has passed from sentiment into reality, and it is the only love that helps anyone.

Connect this to the consistent witness of Scripture, which everywhere binds faith and love to action. Faith without works is dead (James 2:17); the love that fulfills the law does no wrong to a neighbor and meets real needs (Romans 13:8–10). God is not content with a love that stays on the lips.

Apply it without legalism. The point is not to reduce love to a checklist but to ensure our love actually reaches people. Encourage students to let a profession of love prove itself this week in one concrete deed toward a specific person, so that their love is in deed and in truth.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The contrast between professed love (word) and practiced love (deed and truth)
- Deeds as the verification of love that words alone cannot give
- The consistent biblical binding of love and faith to action (James 2:17)
- Concrete love as the goal, without reducing love to mere checklist

Discussion Prompts

- Where is your love more in word than in deed right now?
- Why can words of love deceive us in a way that deeds cannot?
- What is one concrete deed of love you can offer this week?

Question 8

Student Question:

John says that loving in deed and truth lets us “reassure our heart before him” (v. 19). Where do you most need your anxious, self-condemning heart quieted, and how might obeying God in love bring you that assurance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question opens one of the most pastorally tender moments in the letter, and the teacher should handle it gently. John knows that believers often live with a heart that condemns them, an inner accuser that whispers we are not enough, not faithful enough, not loving enough. He does not dismiss this voice but addresses it with the gospel.

Note how John quiets the heart. First, practically: when we are actually loving in deed and truth, we have real evidence that God’s life is in us, and this reassures our hearts. A life that is genuinely, if imperfectly, loving gives the troubled conscience something true to rest on.

Then, more deeply, with the character of God: even when our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and He knows everything. This is profound comfort. God knows our failures more fully than our accusing heart does, and yet, in Christ, He receives us. His verdict, not our anxious self-assessment, is final.

Apply it to the self-condemning believer. The aim is not to silence a conscience that is rightly convicting us of real sin, for that should drive us to confession. The aim is to free the tender, anxious heart that condemns itself beyond what is true, by resting in a God who is greater than our heart and who has dealt with our sin in Christ. Invite students to name where their heart accuses them, and to bring that voice under the greater verdict of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The self-condemning heart and God’s gracious answer to it
- Loving in deed and truth as real evidence that reassures the conscience
- God greater than our heart: His knowledge and verdict over our anxious self-assessment
- The distinction between rightful conviction (leading to confession) and excessive self-condemnation

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your heart most often condemn you?
- How can genuine love in action give your conscience something true to rest on?
- What does it mean that God is greater than your heart and knows everything?

Question 9

Student Question:

John says, “whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments,” and names the commandment as believing in Jesus and loving one another (vv. 22–24). How does

this passage tie together faith, obedience, love, answered prayer, and the abiding presence of God, and what does it teach about the kind of faith that truly saves?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, for here John gathers the great strands of the letter into a single knot. The teacher should slow down and show how faith, obedience, love, prayer, and the abiding presence of God all belong together. John names God's commandment in a striking way: that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another. Faith and love are not two religions but one commandment.

Draw out what this teaches about saving faith. John presents faith and obedience as inseparable. The faith that pleases God is not a bare mental agreement that certain facts are true; it is a living trust that believes in Christ and obeys Him, expressed supremely in love. This is the consistent New Testament picture: faith working through love (Galatians 5:6), faith that obeys, faith that without works is dead (James 2:17). The teacher should make clear, gently but plainly, that this stands against any notion of salvation by faith only, divorced from obedience.

Show how this connects to answered prayer. John says we receive what we ask because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him. This is not earning God's favor like a wage; it is the natural confidence of a child living in harmony with the Father. A life surrendered in obedient faith and love prays in step with God's will, and such prayer is answered. A heart at odds with God, by contrast, often asks amiss (James 4:3).

Bring in the abiding presence of God and the Spirit. John ends by saying that the one who keeps His commandments abides in God and God in him, and we know this by the Spirit He has given us. The indwelling Spirit is the seal and evidence of this mutual abiding. Faith, obedience, and love are the shape of a life in which God Himself dwells.

Land it as the unified vision of the whole letter. To believe in Jesus, to love one another, to keep His commandments, to pray with confidence, to abide in God by His Spirit, these are not separate items on a list but one seamless life. The teacher should help students see that the gospel calls not for a faith that merely assents, nor an obedience that merely performs, but a living, trusting, loving, obedient walk with God, the only kind of faith that truly saves and truly rests in Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith and love as one commandment: believing in Jesus and loving one another (v. 23)
- Saving faith as living and obedient, expressed in love, against faith only (Galatians 5:6; James 2:17)
- Answered prayer flowing from a life of obedient faith in harmony with God's will
- The mutual abiding of God and the believer (v. 24)
- The indwelling Spirit as the seal and evidence of abiding in God

- The unified life of faith, obedience, love, prayer, and abiding presence

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John make believing in Jesus and loving one another a single commandment?
- How does this passage show that saving faith is living and obedient, not bare assent?
- How is confidence in prayer connected to a life of obedient faith and love?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this passage, from Cain to Christ, from cold hearts to laid-down lives. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you, through this passage, into someone who loves not merely in word but in deed and in truth.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the whole passage into a personal step. Trace the movement once more: from Cain's hatred to Christ's laid-down life, from cold and closed hearts to love in deed and truth, and finally to the assurance and abiding presence that such love brings. The passage moves from the anatomy of hatred to the practice of cross-shaped love.

Press for one specific way. For one person it may be reconciling with someone they have written off. For another, meeting a concrete need they have been closing their heart against. For another, turning a profession of love into a deed, or letting love quiet a self-condemning heart.

Frame this as formation by Christ, who first loved us. We do not generate cross-shaped love by sheer effort; we receive His love at the cross and let it flow through us. The motive and the power both come from Him.

Close with the passage's own reward. To love in deed and truth is not only how we obey God but how we come to rest in Him, reassuring our hearts and knowing His abiding presence by the Spirit. Encourage students that the path of love is also the path of assurance and nearness to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Integration of the passage: from hatred to cross-shaped love
- Love as received from Christ before it is extended to others
- Practical love as the path to assurance and abiding
- Spiritual formation as cooperation with the love of Christ in us

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this passage is Christ pressing on you most?

- What single deed of love will you offer this week, and to whom?
- How does receiving Christ's love free you to love others in deed and truth?