

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

Lesson 7: Test the Spirits; God Is Love

1 John 4:1-21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This rich chapter holds two doctrines in a single frame, and the teacher should keep them together. The first is the necessity of discernment: John commands believers to test the spirits, because not every spiritual claim is from God, and many false prophets are in the world. The decisive test is Christological, whether a spirit confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. The teacher should show that this makes a right view of the incarnation and deity of Christ the dividing line of all true faith, and should gently confront the cultural assumption that sincerity or spiritual intensity is self-validating.

The second and central doctrine is that God is love, defined not by human sentiment but by the cross, where God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. The teacher should let this great truth shine, while keeping it anchored: love is who God is, demonstrated in the atoning death of Christ, and our love is always a response, we love because He first loved us. Verse 10's language of propitiation again testifies to a real, wrath-bearing atonement, and (recalling 2:2) to a sacrifice offered for the world, against any narrowing of Christ's saving love. The teacher should also handle perfect love casting out fear with care, presenting the believer's growing confidence before God without slipping into a presumption that ignores the call to abide.

Formationally, the lesson aims to make students both discerning and loving, two traits often wrongly seen as opposites. They should leave able to test teaching by the truth about Jesus, and melted by the love of God so that they love one another from the overflow of having been loved. The teacher should press John's sharp point that love for the unseen God is proven by love for the visible brother, and should offer the freedom of a life increasingly ruled by love rather than fear.

Question 1

Student Question:

John commands, "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (v. 1). What does this teach us about the need for discernment, and why is sincerity or spiritual intensity not enough to prove that something is from God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John assumes a world full of competing spiritual voices, and he commands testing rather than naive acceptance. Discernment is not a lack of faith but an act of faithful love; believing every

spirit is not open-mindedness but danger. The presence of many false prophets makes testing necessary.

Address the modern instinct directly. Our culture treats sincerity as the highest virtue and spiritual experience as self-authenticating: if it feels real and the person means well, who are we to judge? John flatly disagrees. A spirit may be sincere, powerful, and moving, and still not be from God. Feeling and fervor are not the test; truth is.

Explain what testing involves. It is not harsh suspicion of everyone but the careful weighing of every spiritual claim against the truth God has revealed, supremely the truth about Jesus. The believer is called to think, to compare with Scripture, and to refuse to be swept along by emotion alone.

Apply it to our intake. We are surrounded by spiritual messages, in media, in teaching, in popular religion. John's command is to receive none of them uncritically but to test them all. This protects the church and honors God, who has given us His word precisely so we can tell the true from the false.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The command to test the spirits as an act of faithful discernment
- Sincerity and spiritual intensity as insufficient proof of divine origin
- Truth, not feeling or fervor, as the standard of testing
- Scripture, especially the truth about Jesus, as the measure of all spiritual claims

Discussion Prompts

- Why is testing the spirits an act of love rather than a lack of faith?
- How does our culture treat sincerity and experience as self-validating?
- What does careful testing of a teaching actually involve?

Question 2

Student Question:

John gives us a clear test for spiritual claims. How carefully do you actually examine the spiritual messages, teachers, and ideas you take in, and where have you been tempted to accept something simply because it felt moving or popular?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns the command to test toward the student's habits. Many believers absorb spiritual content, books, broadcasts, popular sayings, social media wisdom, with little examination, especially when it is emotionally moving or widely admired.

Help students see the pull of feeling and popularity. A message that stirs us or that everyone seems to endorse slips past our defenses. We assume that what moves us must be true, or that what is popular among believers must be sound. John's test cuts against both assumptions.

Invite honest reflection on where they have been undiscerning. Perhaps a teacher they followed for charisma rather than soundness, a popular idea they adopted without checking it against Scripture, a feeling they trusted as if it were God's voice. The point is not paranoia but greater care.

Encourage a practical discipline of discernment: holding what we hear up to the light of Scripture, asking what it says about Jesus, valuing truth over mere emotional impact, and welcoming the teaching and accountability of the church. Discernment grows with practice and with deepening knowledge of the word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of undiscerning intake of spiritual content
- Emotional impact and popularity as unreliable measures of truth
- Holding teaching up to Scripture as a regular discipline
- The church's teaching and accountability as aids to discernment

Discussion Prompts

- How carefully do you examine the spiritual content you take in?
- Where have you accepted something mainly because it moved you or was popular?
- What discipline would help you test what you hear more faithfully?

Question 3

Student Question:

John says the test of every spirit is whether it "confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (vv. 2–3). Why does John make the incarnation of Christ the dividing line, and what does this teach about how central a right view of Jesus is to all true faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John gives a specific, Christological test: the Spirit of God confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; the spirit of error does not. Once again, the dividing line of true and false faith is what one does with the real Jesus, truly divine and truly come in human flesh.

Explain the historical setting. The false teachers John opposed denied the genuine incarnation, claiming the divine Christ only seemed to take flesh or was distinct from the man Jesus. John makes the confession of the real incarnation the test, because to deny it is to deny the gospel itself.

Show why the incarnation is so central. If the eternal Son did not truly come in the flesh, there is no real atonement, no Mediator, no Savior who can represent us and die for us. The whole structure of salvation depends on this confession. That is why John makes it the test rather than some lesser doctrine.

Apply it as a usable standard. When weighing any teaching, ask what it confesses about Jesus. Does it hold Him to be the eternal Son truly come in the flesh, fully God and truly man? Teachings that diminish Him, whether by denying His deity or His humanity, fail the test, however spiritual they sound.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The incarnation as the decisive test of every spirit (vv. 2–3)
- The confession of Jesus Christ truly come in the flesh as essential to true faith
- The dependence of the atonement and mediation on the real incarnation
- A right view of Jesus as central to all sound doctrine

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John make the incarnation, of all doctrines, the test?
- How does denying Christ's coming in the flesh unravel the gospel?
- How can the confession about Jesus serve as your test of teaching today?

Question 4

Student Question:

John reminds believers, "he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (v. 4). When you face spiritual opposition, doubt, or the pressure of a hostile culture, do you live as though this is true? What would change if you did?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John encourages believers in the midst of a world full of false prophets and opposition: the One in them is greater than the one in the world. The Spirit of God who indwells the believer is mightier than every hostile spiritual power. This is meant to steady frightened hearts.

Help students notice the gap between this truth and their felt experience. Under pressure, doubt, or cultural hostility, we often live as if the opposition were overwhelming and God were small or distant. We feel outnumbered and outmatched. John insists the opposite is the reality.

Draw out what changes when we live in this truth. We can face opposition without panic, engage doubt without despair, and stand for Christ in a hostile setting without being crushed, because the decisive power is not against us but within us. Confidence comes not from our strength but from the greatness of the One who indwells us.

Apply it concretely. The pressure to conform, the fear of standing out, the discouragement of seeming to lose ground in the culture, all look different in light of verse 4. The aim is not triumphalism but quiet courage: we belong to the greater One, and the final outcome is not in doubt.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The indwelling Spirit greater than every hostile power (v. 4)
- The gap between this truth and our fearful experience
- Quiet courage grounded in God's indwelling greatness, not our strength
- Confidence in the assured final outcome under Christ

Discussion Prompts

- When do you most feel spiritually outnumbered or outmatched?
- How would living in the truth of verse 4 change your response to opposition?
- What is the difference between quiet courage and mere triumphalism?

Question 5

Student Question:

John declares, "God is love," and proves it at the cross: "he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (vv. 8–10). What does it mean that God is love, and how does the cross, rather than our feelings, define what that love actually is?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is one of the heaviest doctrinal blocks of the lesson, and the teacher should give it full and joyful treatment. John does not merely say God loves or is loving; he says God is love. Love is not one of God's moods but belongs to His very being. From eternity, Father, Son, and Spirit have existed in perfect love, and all His acts toward us flow from who He is.

Guard the statement from sentimental misuse. Our culture quotes God is love to mean that God affirms everything and judges nothing. John does not let us float the phrase free of its anchor. He immediately defines the love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. The cross, not our feelings, tells us what God's love is.

Unfold propitiation again, as in Lesson 2. It means the sacrifice that bears and turns away the wrath our sin deserves. So God's love is not a love that ignores sin but a love that deals with it at infinite cost to Himself. Holiness and love meet at the cross: God is too holy to overlook sin and too loving to abandon us, so He gave His Son. And recall that this propitiation is for the sins of the world (2:2); the love defined here is wide, not narrow.

Show how this redefines love against feeling. We tend to define love by emotion or by getting what we want. The cross defines it as costly, self-giving action for our true and eternal good.

God's love sought to save us from sin, not merely to make us comfortable. This is a sturdier, deeper love than sentiment could ever be.

Land it on the heart. The teacher should help students feel personally addressed: the eternal God, who is love, set His love on you and gave His Son for you. This is the foundation of everything else in the chapter. We can test spirits, cast out fear, and love one another only because this is true first: God is love, and He proved it at the cross.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God is love: love as belonging to God's very being, not merely His action
- The cross as the definition of God's love, against sentimental misuse
- Propitiation: love that bears and turns away wrath at infinite cost (v. 10)
- Holiness and love meeting at the cross
- The breadth of this love, the Son sent for the sins of the world (2:2)
- Love defined as costly self-giving for our true good, not mere feeling

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between saying God loves and saying God is love?
- How does the cross protect us from a sentimental misuse of God is love?
- How does propitiation show love and holiness meeting together?

Question 6

Student Question:

John says, "we love because he first loved us" (v. 19). Where in your life are you trying to love others out of your own depleted resources, and how might receiving God's love first change the way you give it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes the order of verse 19 personally. John establishes a direction: God's love comes first, and our love is the response and the overflow. We are not the source of love but its recipients, called to pass on what we have received.

Help students recognize the symptoms of trying to love from an empty tank: resentment, exhaustion, keeping score, loving to be loved in return, burning out in service. Much of our relational weariness comes from trying to be the source of a love we were only ever meant to channel.

Point to the remedy. We love well not by squeezing more out of ourselves but by receiving more deeply from God. The believer who is regularly soaking in the love of God in Christ has something to give that does not run dry. Love flows from the loved.

Apply it to specific relationships. Where love feels like a depleting duty, the issue is often that we have stopped drinking from the fountain. Encourage students to return to God's love for them, in the gospel, in prayer, in the Lord's Supper, and to let their love for others flow from that fullness rather than from their own reserves.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The God-given order: He first loved us, and we love in response (v. 19)
- The believer as channel, not source, of love
- The symptoms of loving from depleted self-resources
- Receiving God's love as the wellspring of love for others

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you trying to love out of an empty tank?
- What are the signs that you are loving from depletion rather than fullness?
- How might receiving God's love more deeply change the way you give it?

Question 7

Student Question:

John writes, "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (v. 12). What does this teach about how the invisible God becomes visible in the world, and about the connection between God abiding in us and our love for one another?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John makes a remarkable connection. No one has ever seen God, yet when we love one another, the invisible God becomes visible, abiding in us, and His love reaches its goal in us. Our love for one another is the place where the unseen God shows Himself to the world.

Draw out the dignity this gives to ordinary Christian love. When believers love one another in concrete ways, they are not merely being kind; they are making the invisible God visible. The world cannot see God directly, but it can see Him in a community shaped by His love. This is part of the church's witness.

Explain the perfecting of love. John says God's love is perfected, brought to its intended completion, in us when we love one another. God's love is not meant to terminate on us but to flow through us; it reaches its goal when it produces love in us toward others. A love received but never shared is love arrested before its purpose.

Apply it to the church and to witness. The most powerful display of God in the world is not an argument but a community that genuinely loves. Encourage students to see their love for fellow believers as a way of making God visible, and to take seriously how the watching world reads God off our life together.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The invisible God made visible through the love of His people
- Christian love as part of the church's witness to the world
- The perfecting (completion) of God's love as it flows through us to others
- Love received and shared, not love arrested in ourselves

Discussion Prompts

- How does our love for one another make the invisible God visible?
- What does it mean that God's love is perfected in us when we love?
- How does the watching world read God off the way Christians treat each other?

Question 8

Student Question:

John ties love and fear together: "perfect love casts out fear" (v. 18). What fear is God inviting you to surrender to His love, and what would it look like to live less from fear and more from the security of being loved by Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John connects the maturing of love with the casting out of fear. The specific fear in view is fear of judgment, the dread of standing condemned before God; but the principle reaches into every fear that rules the heart. As we grow secure in God's love, fear loses its grip.

Handle this pastorally and carefully. John is not promising that mature believers feel no anxiety ever, nor licensing a presumption that ignores the call to abide and obey. He is describing the deep security of those who rest in God's love: they need not cower before Him as a hostile judge, for the One who is love has loved them and dealt with their sin in Christ.

Help students name the fears that still rule them: fear of judgment, of rejection, of failure, of not being enough, of the future. Much of our sin and much of our misery is fear-driven. John offers not a technique for managing fear but a love to rest in that dissolves it from the inside.

Apply it as a reorientation. To live from love rather than fear is to act out of security rather than scarcity, to obey out of trust rather than dread, to face the future as those held by a God who is love. Invite students to bring one ruling fear into the light of God's love and to begin entrusting it to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Perfect love casting out fear, especially fear of judgment (v. 18)
- The security of those who rest in God's love, against a cowering dread
- Balance: growing confidence without presumption that ignores abiding

- Living from love and security rather than fear and scarcity

Discussion Prompts

- What fear still rules a corner of your heart?
- How does resting in God's love loosen fear's grip rather than merely managing it?
- What would it look like to obey out of trust rather than dread?

Question 9

Student Question:

John says plainly, "if anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar" (v. 20), grounding our love for one another in God's prior love for us. Why does John insist that love for the unseen God must show itself in love for the brother we can see, and what does this reveal about the kind of faith and love that are real?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John closes the chapter with a test as sharp as the one for spirits. The claim to love God is exposed as a lie if it coexists with hatred of a brother. He reasons that the one who does not love the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen. Love for God that does not produce love for people is no love at all.

Explain why this follows. Love for the invisible God is real only as it takes visible form, and the nearest visible form is the brother in front of us. To claim warm devotion to God while harboring contempt for His children is self-contradiction; it claims to love the Father while despising those who bear His image and share His life.

Connect this to the whole letter's vision of real faith and love. Just as John has insisted that real faith obeys and that real love acts in deed and truth, here he insists that real love for God shows itself in love for people. The vertical and the horizontal cannot be separated; love for God and love for the brother are one fabric, not two.

Apply it searchingly. It is possible to enjoy worship, to feel moved in private devotion, and yet to nurse coldness toward fellow believers, and so to be, in John's blunt word, a liar. The test of our love for God is not the intensity of our feelings in His presence but the reality of our love toward the people He has given us. Invite students to let love for a specific brother or sister be the proof of their love for God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love for God necessarily shown in love for the visible brother (v. 20)
- The self-contradiction of professed love for God joined to hatred of His children
- The inseparability of love for God and love for people (Matthew 22:37-40)
- Real love for God tested by love for people, not by intensity of feeling

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John say love for God must show in love for the brother we can see?
- How can we deceive ourselves with warm feelings toward God and coldness toward people?
- Whom does your love for God need to reach in order to prove real?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this passage, from testing the spirits, to the God who is love, to perfect love that casts out fear. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you, through this passage, into someone who both holds fast to the truth about Him and loves as one who has been loved.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone holds together the two notes of the chapter, discernment and love, that students may wrongly treat as opposites. Trace the movement: test every spirit by the truth about Jesus; rest in the God who is love, proven at the cross; and let that love cast out fear and overflow toward one another.

Press for one specific way Jesus is forming them. For one it may be a new commitment to discernment, testing what they take in. For another it may be receiving God's love more deeply so as to love from fullness. For another it may be surrendering a ruling fear, or letting love for a specific brother prove their love for God.

Resist the false choice between truth and love. The mature believer is both rigorously discerning and deeply loving, because both flow from the same Christ: He is the truth we confess and the love we have received. To grow in one rightly is to grow in the other.

Close in the security of being loved first. We hold fast to the truth and we love others not by straining but by abiding in the God who is love and who loved us first. Encourage students to leave both clear-eyed about the truth of Jesus and melted by the love of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Discernment and love held together, both flowing from Christ
- Truth confessed and love received as one Christian life
- Love and security as the soil of both discernment and obedience
- Abiding in the God who is love as the source of growth

Discussion Prompts

- Which note does Christ want to strengthen in you now: discernment or love?
- How are holding fast to truth and loving others actually connected?
- What single step will you take to grow in both this week?