

How Can I Know?, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: The Obedience Test: Keeping His Commands

1 John 2:3-6

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage gives John's first great test of genuine faith: we know that we have come to know God if we keep His commandments. The teacher must present obedience not as a means of earning salvation but as the natural overflow and evidence of a real relationship with God. The heaviest doctrinal issue here, and the one most relevant to a study on assurance, is the answer to salvation by "faith only." John insists that a profession of knowing God which leaves the life in disobedience is a lie. This must be handled clearly: saving faith is a living, obeying faith, expressed in belief, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ, and continued in a life of keeping His commands. At the same time, the lesson must avoid tipping into legalism, the idea that obedience earns God's acceptance.

The pastoral danger runs in two directions, and the teacher should name both. The careless hearer treats obedience as optional and rests in a profession his life contradicts; he needs John's bracing warning in verse 4. The anxious hearer scans his imperfect obedience and concludes he must not know God at all; he needs to see that John offers this test to reassure the sincere, not to torment them. A life genuinely, if imperfectly, learning to keep God's commands is a life in which His grace is at work.

Beyond the doctrine, aim at formation. The goal is not merely to win the argument against 'faith only' but to help students love God enough to obey Him from the heart, and to find in their growing obedience a quiet, honest assurance that they truly belong to Him. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9. Let it carry the weight of the 'faith only' question, while the rest of the lesson presses obedience gently into the heart as the fruit and evidence of love.

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 John mean by "knowing" God here, and why does he point to obedience as the evidence of it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the rich biblical sense of "knowing" God. This is not knowing about God, the way one knows facts about a distant figure. It is relational, covenant knowledge, the intimate knowing of a person with whom we are joined. John says this kind of knowing leaves a mark: it shows up in a life that keeps God's commands.

Explain why obedience is the natural evidence rather than an arbitrary test. If we have truly come to know the holy God, His character begins to reshape our desires and choices. Obedience is not a hoop to jump through to prove ourselves; it is the visible overflow of a real relationship. A heart that has met God wants to please Him.

Guard against two distortions. This is not knowledge of God earned by obedience, as though we worked our way into relationship. Nor is it relationship without obedience, as though knowing God left the life untouched. The knowing comes first, by grace through faith; the obedience flows out of it as evidence.

Connect this to assurance, the theme of our study. John offers obedience as a test we can actually look at. When we honestly see God's commands shaping our choices, however imperfectly, we have real evidence that we have come to know Him. The test is meant to steady us, not to shake us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Knowing God as relational, covenant intimacy, not mere information about Him
- Obedience as the natural overflow and evidence of genuinely knowing God
- Against earning relationship by obedience, and against relationship that never touches the life
- Obedience as an observable ground of assurance

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between knowing about God and truly knowing Him?
- Why is obedience the natural evidence that we have come to know God?
- How can honestly seeing God's commands shape your life strengthen your assurance?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think honestly about your own obedience to God. Is there a command of His that you have quietly filed away as optional or negotiable? What would it look like this week to take that command seriously as the word of the One you say you love?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses the test inward. Most of us have a command or two we have unofficially retired, an area of speech, money, forgiveness, purity, or worship where we have decided God will understand if we make an exception. Naming it honestly is the first step.

Help students see that selective obedience is a subtle form of being our own lord. When we obey the commands we find agreeable and quietly set aside the ones we find costly, we are not really submitting to God; we are negotiating with Him while keeping the final say for ourselves.

Be pastoral. The goal is not to crush students under the weight of every imperfection but to invite honesty about one genuine area of settled resistance. Often the issue is not ignorance but avoidance; we know the command well enough, we have simply learned not to look at it.

Move toward action. Ask each student to name one concrete step of obedience in that area this week. Obedience grows by specific acts, not by general good intentions, and a single honest act of submission often loosens a long-standing resistance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Selective obedience as a subtle assertion of self-lordship
- The difference between submitting to God and negotiating with Him
- Honest self-examination as a path to growth, not condemnation
- Obedience grown through specific acts rather than general intentions

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a command of God you have quietly treated as negotiable?
- How is selective obedience really a way of keeping the final say for ourselves?
- What is one concrete step of obedience you could take in that area this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

John speaks bluntly: "Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (v. 4). Why does John use such strong language, and what is he warning against?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John does not soften this. The one who claims to know God while disregarding His commands is, John says, a liar in whom the truth is not. The strong language is meant to shake the careless out of a false security that could cost them everything.

Clarify what John is and is not saying. He is not describing a believer who stumbles and grieves and gets back up; the whole letter assumes such people exist and reassures them. He is describing someone whose life shows a settled disregard for God's commands while the mouth keeps claiming intimacy with Him. The claim and the conduct contradict, and the conduct tells the truth.

This is a direct warning against an assurance built on words alone. A person can say all the right things, even believe his own claim, and yet be deceived if his life shows no real submission to God. John loves his readers too much to let them rest in a profession that their lives contradict.

Yet steer the anxious believer away from misapplying this. The very fact that a person is troubled by his disobedience, that he wants to keep God's commands and grieves when he fails, is evidence that the truth is in him. John's harsh words are aimed at the comfortable, not at the contrite.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seriousness of a profession of faith contradicted by the life
- The difference between settled disregard for God's commands and the stumbling of a sincere believer
- Against an assurance built on words and claims alone
- John's warning aimed at the comfortable, not the contrite

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John use such strong language here?
- How would you distinguish the person John warns from a sincere believer who still struggles with sin?
- Why should this warning comfort, rather than frighten, the contrite heart?

Question 4

Student Question:

It is possible to obey God outwardly while the heart remains far from Him. Examine your own obedience: where is it flowing from love for God, and where has it hardened into mere duty, habit, or fear of looking bad?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question probes the motive beneath the action. John ties obedience to knowing and loving God, and the next verses speak of God's love being perfected in us. Obedience that springs from love is the goal; obedience that has curdled into cold duty or image management is a warning sign worth heeding.

Help students see that the issue is not that duty is bad, sometimes we obey rightly even when feelings lag, but that obedience meant only to impress others, soothe guilt, or maintain a reputation has lost its heart. God desires sons and daughters who obey out of love, not hirelings who perform out of fear.

Invite gentle honesty. Many faithful churchgoers can identify a drift in which the outward forms continued while the affection cooled. This is not cause for despair but for renewal; naming the drift is the first step back toward love.

Point to the remedy. The cure for cold obedience is not to try harder to feel something, but to return to the love of God in Christ, to remember what He has done, and to let gratitude rekindle the affection from which true obedience flows.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience from love versus obedience from cold duty, fear, or image management
- The proper place of duty even when feelings lag, and its corruption when love is gone
- The danger of performing obedience to impress others or soothe guilt
- Returning to the love of God in Christ as the cure for cold obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Where is your obedience flowing from love, and where has it hardened into mere duty?
- What is the difference between obeying as a son and obeying as a hireling?
- How can remembering God's love rekindle obedience that has gone cold?

Question 5

Student Question:

John promises, "Whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected" (v. 5). What does it mean that God's love is "perfected," or brought to its goal, in those who keep His word?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The word translated "perfected" means brought to completion or to its intended goal, not made flawless. John is saying that God's love reaches its intended end, its full purpose, in the person who actually keeps God's word. Love that never shaped a life would be love that never arrived.

Explain the flow of this love. God's love comes to us first, freely, in Christ. As we receive it and respond by keeping His word, that love accomplishes what it set out to do: it transforms us. Obedience is not the cause of God's love but the place where His love completes its work.

This protects against two errors. It is not that we perfect ourselves by obeying; it is God's love that does the perfecting. And it is not that God's love leaves us unchanged; love that truly lands always reshapes the beloved. Keeping His word is the evidence that His love has taken hold.

For assurance, this is deeply encouraging. When we see God's word actually reshaping our lives, we are watching His love reach its goal in us. That visible transformation, however partial, is evidence that we genuinely belong to Him and that His love is at work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- "Perfected" as brought to its intended goal, not made flawless
- God's love coming first and completing its work through our obedience

- Transformation as the evidence that God's love has truly taken hold
- Visible reshaping of life as a ground of assurance

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God's love is brought to its goal in those who keep His word?
- How does this guard against thinking we perfect ourselves by obeying?
- Where have you seen God's word actually reshaping your life?

Question 6

Student Question:

John says the one who claims to abide in Christ "ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (v. 6). When you look honestly at how Jesus lived, in what specific way is He calling you to walk more like Him right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John raises the standard to its highest: the one who claims to abide in Christ ought to walk as Jesus walked. This is not a vague spirituality but a concrete pattern, the life of Jesus Himself, marked by humility, compassion, truthfulness, purity, and obedience to the Father.

Help students move from the general to the specific. Walking as Jesus walked is too large to tackle all at once; the question asks for one particular area. Perhaps it is His patience, His honesty, His care for the overlooked, His refusal to retaliate, His unhurried trust in the Father.

Guard against discouragement. No one walks exactly as Jesus walked, and the goal is direction, not instant arrival. The call is to take the next step in conforming to His pattern, trusting the Spirit to keep shaping us into His likeness over time.

Make it actionable. Ask students to name one situation this week, a relationship, a temptation, a habit, where they could deliberately ask, "How would Jesus walk here?" and then take a concrete step in that direction.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Abiding in Christ as walking in the concrete pattern of His life
- The life of Jesus as the model for the believer's conduct
- Conformity to Christ as a direction and lifelong process, not instant arrival
- The Spirit's work in shaping us into Christ's likeness

Discussion Prompts

- Which specific quality of how Jesus walked most challenges you right now?
- Why is it freeing to aim at direction rather than instant perfection?

- Where could you deliberately ask, 'How would Jesus walk here?' this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Some treat obedience as legalism and assume that emphasizing it undermines grace. How does John relate obedience to genuine faith, and why is keeping God's commands not the same thing as legalism?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Define the terms carefully. Legalism is the attempt to earn or merit salvation by law-keeping, or the binding of human rules as though they were God's commands. John is doing neither. He is describing the obedience that flows out of a relationship already received by grace through faith.

Show the proper order. We do not obey in order to be accepted; we obey because we have been accepted. Grace comes first and gives both the desire and the power to obey. Obedience that springs from gratitude and love is the opposite of legalism, even though both involve keeping God's commands.

Address the common confusion directly. To say that genuine faith obeys is not to deny grace; it is to describe what saving grace actually does. The grace that forgives is also the grace that transforms. A grace that left the life unchanged would not be the grace of the New Testament.

This matters for the whole study. An assurance that dismisses obedience as legalism is building on sand. True assurance welcomes the evidence of a changed life, not as a wage we have earned, but as proof that grace has truly taken root.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Legalism defined: earning salvation by law-keeping or binding human rules as divine
- The proper order of grace and obedience: we obey because accepted, not to be accepted
- Saving grace as the power that transforms, not merely a verdict that leaves us unchanged
- The difference between obedience flowing from love and works performed to earn merit

Discussion Prompts

- How would you explain the difference between biblical obedience and legalism?
- Why does emphasizing obedience not undermine grace?
- How does a grace that leaves the life unchanged fall short of the New Testament's message?

Question 8

Student Question:

Obedience often costs us most in the small, hidden choices no one else sees. Where is God asking you to obey in a place where it would be easy to cut corners because no one would know? How does your private obedience reveal what you truly believe about God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves obedience into the secret place. Much of our visible obedience is reinforced by the watching eyes of others. The truer test of whether we know God is how we act when no one is watching, when cutting a corner would cost us nothing socially.

Help students see that private obedience reveals what we actually believe about God's presence and authority. To obey in secret is to live as though God is truly there, truly sees, and truly matters more than getting away with it. Hidden disobedience quietly says the opposite.

Name common arenas: what we watch and click in private, how we work when unsupervised, the honesty of our words when no one can check, the thoughts we entertain. These hidden choices form the real shape of the soul over time.

Encourage hope, not just scrutiny. Every hidden act of obedience, unseen by others, is seen by God and is building genuine character and deepening real assurance. The private place is where the most authentic walk with God is forged.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Private obedience as the truer test of genuine faith
- Hidden choices as a revelation of what we truly believe about God's presence and authority
- The formation of character in the secret place
- God's unseen approval as encouragement to hidden faithfulness

Discussion Prompts

- Where would it be easy to cut corners because no one would know?
- What does your private obedience reveal about what you really believe about God?
- How does it encourage you that God sees and values your hidden faithfulness?

Question 9

Student Question:

Some teach that since we are saved by faith, obedience is optional, a kind of bonus for the especially committed. How does this passage answer the idea of salvation by "faith only," and how do we hold faith and obedience together without falling into either license or legalism?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson and deserves the fullest treatment. John flatly contradicts the notion that one can know God while ignoring His commands. The person who claims to know Him but does not keep His commandments is, John says, a liar. Obedience is not an optional add-on to faith; it is the very evidence that faith is real.

Address the phrase “faith only” directly. The single place in Scripture where the words “faith only” appear together is James 2:24, which says a person is justified by works and “not by faith alone.” James and John agree: a faith that produces no obedience is dead, unable to save. Saving faith is a living, trusting, obeying faith. This is the consistent teaching of the New Testament, not a denial of grace.

Set out the biblical response to the gospel so students see where obedience begins. The gospel calls a person to believe in Jesus as Lord and Christ, to repent of sin, to confess Him, and to be baptized into Him for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27). These are not human works of merit that earn salvation; they are the obedient response of faith to God’s gracious offer. Discipleship then continues as a lifelong walk of keeping His commands.

Now hold the two dangers apart. License says faith saves and obedience does not matter, turning grace into permission to keep sinning; Scripture answers that genuine faith always obeys. Legalism says obedience earns salvation and grace is beside the point; Scripture answers that we obey because we have been saved by grace, not in order to merit it. John walks the narrow road between them: grace received by an obedient faith, evidenced by a life that keeps God’s word.

Bring it home for assurance. The believer should neither dismiss obedience as legalism nor try to earn God’s acceptance by it. He rests in the grace of God received through an obedient faith, and he welcomes the obedience that grace produces as the very evidence that he has come to know God. That is the settled middle where real assurance lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Against salvation by “faith only”: the only biblical use of the phrase denies it (James 2:24)
- Saving faith as a living, obeying faith, not bare mental assent (James 2:17–26)
- The obedient response of faith: belief, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27)
- Obedient response distinguished from meritorious works that earn salvation
- Holding faith and obedience together, against both license and legalism
- Welcoming the obedience grace produces as evidence of genuine faith and a ground of assurance

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage answer the idea that obedience is optional for the believer?
- How do James and John agree about faith and works?

- How do we honor grace while still taking obedience seriously, avoiding both license and legalism?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this lesson on keeping God's commands. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses, and the single truth from 1 John 2:3-6 that you most need to carry into the coming week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson and turns it toward personal formation. The goal is an honest response rather than another piece of information. Give students quiet space and let the silence do its work.

Listen for where each person stands. Some need to take a command they have been treating as optional and finally submit to it. Others, weary and anxious, need to see that their sincere desire to obey is itself evidence that they truly know God.

Encourage something concrete and carry-able: one act of obedience to take this week, one area of cold duty to bring back to love, or a single phrase from verse 5 to hold onto. Obedience and assurance both grow through practice.

Point forward. Having seen obedience as evidence of genuine faith, the next lesson turns to the companion test John gives: love for the brethren. Reassure the class that these tests work together to confirm, not erode, the assurance we are building.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of the study, not merely information
- The same passage warning the careless and reassuring the contrite
- Obedience and assurance grown through practice
- The obedience test as a companion to the love test that follows

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from this lesson you most need to carry this week?
- Where is Jesus calling you to a specific act of obedience?
- How might your sincere desire to obey actually reassure you that you know God?