

How Can I Know?, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: The Love Test: Loving the Brethren

1 John 2:7–11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage gives John's second great test of genuine faith, the companion to the obedience test of the previous lesson: love for the brethren. The teacher should present love not as an optional sentiment but as a command at the very center of God's will, given fresh content and a higher standard by Jesus Himself. The key doctrinal point for a study on assurance is that love for fellow believers is evidence of having passed from death to life. This guards against a hollow assurance built on correct belief that never bears fruit in how we actually treat people, another face of the 'faith only' error. Genuine faith works through love.

The pastoral task runs in two directions. The careless or cold-hearted hearer, who professes faith while harboring contempt, avoidance, or unforgiveness toward fellow believers, needs John's sober warning that hatred leaves a person in blinding darkness. The anxious hearer needs to see that John points to real and growing love, not flawless love, and that the very presence of costly love for difficult people is one of the most reassuring signs in the letter, precisely because it is so hard to counterfeit.

Beyond the doctrine, aim at formation. The goal is that students leave not merely agreeing that they should love, but actually moving toward a specific hard-to-love brother or sister with concrete, costly love and forgiveness. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, which sets love as evidence of genuine salvation and guards against fruitless belief. Let that question carry the weight, while the rest of the lesson presses the love test gently and personally into the heart.

Question 1

Student Question:

John calls the command to love both an "old commandment" and "a new commandment" (vv. 7–8). In what sense is the call to love both old and new, and why does John frame it this way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John says the commandment is old because his readers have had it from the beginning; love has been God's requirement from of old, woven through the Law and the Prophets. There is nothing novel about being told to love. So in one sense John is simply reminding them of what they have always known.

Yet he also calls it new. The newness is found in Jesus, who gave the command fresh content and a fresh standard: “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). In Christ, love is no longer merely a rule on a page but a Person who laid down His life. The command is new because the love it calls for has now been embodied and demonstrated.

John adds that the newness is being realized “because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” A new age has dawned in Christ. The love that marks the new covenant community is one of the signs that the light has come and is spreading. Love is evidence that the new day is real and at work.

For assurance, this matters. The love John calls for is not a vague human kindness but the distinctly Christlike love made possible by the coming of the light. When that kind of love appears in us, it is a sign that we belong to the new day, that the darkness is genuinely passing away in our own lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The command to love as old, rooted in God’s requirement from the beginning
- The command made new in Christ, who gave it fresh content and a fresh standard (John 13:34)
- Love as a mark of the new age dawning in Christ, the light overcoming darkness
- Christlike love as evidence of belonging to the new day

Discussion Prompts

- In what sense is the command to love both old and new?
- How did Jesus give the ancient command fresh content and a higher standard?
- Why is Christlike love a sign that the light has truly come?

Question 2

Student Question:

Bring to mind a specific fellow believer you find difficult to love. What is the real condition of your heart toward that person, and what is one concrete way you could move toward genuine love rather than mere tolerance this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question makes the test personal at once. It is easy to affirm love for the brethren in the abstract; it is much harder to face our heart toward the particular brother or sister who has wounded, annoyed, or disappointed us. Naming that person honestly is where the lesson begins to do real work.

Help students distinguish biblical love from mere feeling and from mere tolerance. We are not commanded to feel warm toward everyone, nor merely to avoid open conflict. We are

commanded to actively seek the good of the other, which often begins with prayer, with a kind word, with refusing to nurse the grievance.

Address the gap between avoidance and love. Tolerating someone at a careful distance can masquerade as peace while the heart quietly grows cold. John's standard is higher: not the absence of hostility, but the presence of genuine, active love.

Move toward a concrete step. Ask each student to name one specific action toward that hard-to-love person this week: a prayer for their good, a word of encouragement, a wrong let go, an act of service. Love grows as it is practiced toward the very people we find hardest.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Biblical love as active pursuit of another's good, not mere feeling
- The difference between genuine love and careful tolerance at a distance
- Nursed grievances as a quiet enemy of love
- Love grown through concrete acts toward the hard-to-love

Discussion Prompts

- What is the real condition of your heart toward the person who came to mind?
- How is genuine love different from simply tolerating someone from a distance?
- What is one concrete act of love you could offer that person this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

John says, "Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling" (v. 10). What is the connection between loving fellow believers and walking in the light, and how does love keep us from stumbling?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John ties love and light tightly together. To abide in the light, the realm of God's truth and holiness, is to love; to love is the evidence that we are abiding there. Love is not separate from walking in the light; it is one of its surest signs.

Consider the promise that in the one who loves "there is no cause for stumbling." Love removes much of what trips us up spiritually. The person walking in love is not consumed by resentment, envy, or the scheming that bitterness breeds. A heart at peace with its brothers walks more surely.

Contrast this with the inner chaos of hatred, which John will describe next. Hatred disorients; it darkens the mind and corrodes judgment. Love, by contrast, clarifies. The loving heart sees more truly because it is not bent and twisted by resentment.

For assurance, this is encouraging. When we find ourselves genuinely loving fellow believers, even imperfectly, we have evidence that we are abiding in the light. And as love grows, the very occasions for spiritual stumbling diminish; love steadies the walk.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love and walking in the light as inseparable
- Love as a stabilizing power that removes many occasions for stumbling
- Resentment and bitterness as sources of spiritual stumbling
- Genuine love as evidence of abiding in the light

Discussion Prompts

- How are loving fellow believers and walking in the light connected?
- In what ways does love actually keep us from stumbling?
- How does resentment darken and destabilize the heart?

Question 4

Student Question:

We can be tempted to keep our faith private and vertical, a matter only between us and God, while keeping difficult people at arm's length. Where have you been tempted to separate loving God from loving His people, and why is that separation impossible according to John?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question exposes a favorite escape route. Many of us would prefer a tidy, private spirituality, just me and God, where the people who frustrate us cannot complicate things. John, and his Lord, will not allow it. Love for God and love for His people are bound together and cannot be pulled apart.

Help students see why the separation is impossible. Later in the letter John says it bluntly: anyone who claims to love God while hating his brother is a liar, for the one who does not love his visible brother cannot love the invisible God (1 John 4:20). Our treatment of God's people is the truest evidence of our love for God Himself.

Name the ways we attempt the separation: warm feelings in worship paired with cold avoidance of certain members; rich private devotions paired with unresolved grudges; zeal for doctrine paired with contempt for people. John calls all of this out.

Move toward integration. The goal is a faith in which love for God overflows naturally into love for His people, where the vertical and the horizontal are one. Invite students to name where the seam has split and to begin mending it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The inseparability of love for God and love for His people (1 John 4:20)
- Treatment of God's people as the truest evidence of love for God
- The error of a purely private, vertical spirituality
- Integration of love for God and love for neighbor as the goal

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you been tempted to keep your faith private and avoid difficult people?
- Why does John say it is impossible to love God while hating a brother?
- What would it look like to let your love for God overflow into love for His people?

Question 5

Student Question:

John warns, "Whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (v. 11). What does this teach about what hatred and bitterness do to a person spiritually?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John's language is severe and revealing. Hatred does not merely strain a relationship; it places a person in darkness, blinds his eyes, and leaves him stumbling without knowing where he is going. Sin against a brother has consequences in the very faculties of the soul.

Note that in John's thought, 'hatred' is not only active malice but also the settled withholding of love. To refuse to love, to harbor resentment, to nurse a grudge, is in John's terms to be in the darkness. This is sobering, because such attitudes can hide comfortably under a respectable exterior.

Explain the blinding effect. Bitterness distorts perception. The resentful person rehearses the offense, interprets everything in the worst light, and loses the ability to see clearly, including the ability to see his own condition. The darkness blinds, and the blinded person does not even realize he is lost.

Turn toward hope. The remedy for this darkness is to come back into the light through repentance, forgiveness, and renewed love. No one needs to remain blinded; the moment we let go of the hatred and turn to love, the eyes begin to clear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hatred as placing a person in spiritual darkness and blindness
- Hatred in John's sense as including the settled withholding of love and nursing of grudges
- The blinding, distorting effect of bitterness on perception and self-knowledge
- Repentance, forgiveness, and renewed love as the path back into the light

Discussion Prompts

- What does John say hatred does to a person spiritually?
- Why might the settled withholding of love be more dangerous because it hides so easily?
- How does the light return to a heart that has been darkened by bitterness?

Question 6

Student Question:

Forgiveness is one of love's hardest tests. Is there someone in the family of God you have not truly forgiven? What is holding you back, and what would it cost you to release that grievance into God's hands?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses on the place where love most often fails among believers: unforgiveness. Many people who would never describe themselves as hateful are quietly holding an old wound, replaying an offense, keeping a careful ledger. John's words apply directly here.

Help students understand what forgiveness is and is not. Forgiveness is releasing the debt, refusing to hold the offense against the person, entrusting justice to God. It is not pretending the wrong did not happen, nor necessarily restoring a relationship as if nothing occurred, especially where ongoing harm is involved.

Name what holds us back: the sense that forgiving lets the offender off the hook, the fear of being hurt again, the strange comfort of nursing the grievance. Gently challenge each of these with the gospel: we forgive because we have been forgiven so much more (Ephesians 4:32).

Point to the cost and the freedom. Forgiveness does cost something; it means absorbing the wound rather than passing it back. But it also frees the forgiver from the prison of bitterness. Invite students to name one grievance they will begin to release this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Forgiveness as releasing a debt and entrusting justice to God
- What forgiveness is not: denying the wrong or necessarily restoring unsafe relationships
- Forgiving because we have been forgiven in Christ (Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 18:21–35)
- Bitterness as a prison from which forgiveness frees the forgiver

Discussion Prompts

- Is there someone in God's family you have not truly forgiven?
- What is the difference between forgiving someone and pretending the wrong never happened?
- What is holding you back, and what would it free you to finally release it?

Question 7

Student Question:

John roots our love in something deeper than our own resolve. Drawing on the wider witness of his letter, where does the power to love the brethren actually come from, and why can it not be manufactured by sheer willpower?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John will say later in the letter, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). The power to love the brethren is not summoned out of our own reserves; it flows from having first received the love of God in Christ. Love is response before it is effort.

Explain why willpower alone fails. We can grit our teeth and behave politely for a time, but a love that must be manufactured by sheer determination soon runs dry, especially toward those who keep wounding us. Only a heart that has itself been loved and forgiven has a wellspring deep enough to keep loving.

Connect this to the gospel. When we truly grasp how much we have been forgiven, how patiently God bears with us, how freely He loves us in Christ, that love begins to overflow toward others. The forgiven heart forgives; the loved heart loves. This is why dwelling on the love of God is so practical.

For assurance, this is significant. The very presence of a supernatural, persevering love for difficult people is evidence that we have received something from God that we could not produce ourselves. That love is a fingerprint of grace, and therefore a ground of confidence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love as response to having first been loved by God (1 John 4:19)
- The insufficiency of willpower to produce lasting, Christlike love
- The forgiven and loved heart as the wellspring of love for others
- Supernatural love for difficult people as a fingerprint of grace and a ground of assurance

Discussion Prompts

- Where does the power to love the brethren actually come from?
- Why does love manufactured by sheer willpower eventually run dry?
- How does dwelling on God’s love for you change the way you love others?

Question 8

Student Question:

Love for the brethren shows itself not mainly in feelings but in concrete action. In what specific, practical way is God calling you to actively serve or bless a fellow believer in the days ahead, especially in a way that costs you something?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves love from sentiment to action. John will later insist that love is shown “in deed and in truth,” not merely “in word or talk” (1 John 3:18). The love that proves genuine is the love that does something costly for the good of another.

Help students think concretely. Love in action might mean a meal cooked, a debt forgiven, time given to someone lonely, a hard conversation handled with grace, practical help for someone struggling. The point is that real love takes a tangible shape.

Highlight the element of cost. Love that costs nothing rarely proves much. It is the inconvenient act, the sacrifice of time or money or comfort, that most clearly reveals and forms genuine love. Jesus loved us at the greatest cost; our love grows as we follow that pattern.

Press for a specific commitment. Ask students to name one concrete, costly act of love toward a fellow believer this week. Then encourage them to actually do it, because love, like obedience, grows by being practiced rather than merely intended.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love shown in deed and truth, not merely in word (1 John 3:18)
- The tangible, practical shape of genuine love
- The revealing and forming power of costly love
- Christ’s costly love as the pattern for ours

Discussion Prompts

- What specific, practical act of love is God calling you to this week?
- Why does love that costs us something reveal more than love that costs nothing?
- Who in God’s family most needs a concrete act of love from you right now?

Question 9

Student Question:

John makes love for fellow believers a test of whether we have truly passed from death to life. How does this love function as evidence of genuine salvation, and how does it guard against an assurance built on belief that bears no fruit in how we treat others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson and deserves the fullest treatment. John presents love for the brethren as one of the great tests of genuine faith. Later he states it directly: “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers” (1 John 3:14). Love is not merely a nice addition to salvation; it is evidence that salvation is real.

Show how this guards against a hollow assurance. A person may profess belief, hold correct doctrine, and feel religiously sincere, and yet treat fellow believers with contempt, coldness, or unforgiveness. John says such a person should not rest easy. An assurance built on belief that bears no fruit in love is exactly the kind of false confidence John writes to expose.

Tie this back to the obedience test of the previous lesson. The command to love is the center of God’s commands, so the love test and the obedience test are really one. To claim faith while refusing to love is another form of the ‘faith only’ error that leaves the life unchanged. Genuine faith works through love (Galatians 5:6).

Yet hold the reassurance firmly alongside the warning, for anxious believers will need it. John is pointing to the genuine presence and direction of love, not to a flawless, effortless love that never struggles. The believer who finds in himself a real, if imperfect, love for God’s people, who grieves when he fails to love and keeps seeking to love better, has the very evidence John says marks those who have passed from death to life.

Bring it home. Love is meant to be one of the most reassuring tests in the letter, because it is so hard to counterfeit over time. When we see in ourselves a growing, costly love for the people of God, especially the difficult ones, we are looking at evidence that the life of God is genuinely in us. That is solid ground for assurance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love for the brethren as evidence of having passed from death to life (1 John 3:14)
- Against an assurance built on belief that bears no fruit in love
- The unity of the love test and the obedience test, both answering ‘faith only’
- Faith working through love as the mark of genuine faith (Galatians 5:6)
- Reassurance for the believer whose love is real and growing though imperfect
- Costly, persevering love as one of the hardest signs to counterfeit, and thus a strong ground of assurance

Discussion Prompts

- How does love for fellow believers serve as evidence of genuine salvation?
- Why is an assurance built on fruitless belief a false confidence?
- How does this test reassure the believer whose love is real but still imperfect?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this lesson on loving the brethren. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses, and the single truth from 1 John 2:7–11 that you most need to carry into the coming week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson and turns it toward formation. Aim for a personal, honest response rather than another fact, and give students room to reflect.

Listen for where each person is. Some need to face a relationship they have allowed to grow cold and take a step toward love or forgiveness. Others, who have been loving difficult people for years at real cost, need to hear that this very love is strong evidence that they belong to God.

Encourage something concrete: one act of love or forgiveness to carry out this week, one grudge to release, or a phrase from verse 10 to hold onto. Love and assurance both deepen through practice.

Point forward. Having seen obedience and love as twin tests of genuine faith, the next lesson turns to what happens when we sin, the ministry of Christ as our Advocate and the cleansing that keeps the honest believer secure. Reassure the class that the path leads deeper into assurance, not into fear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of the study, not merely information
- The same passage warning the cold and reassuring the faithfully loving
- Love and assurance deepened through practice
- The love test as a companion to the obedience test, leading toward the ministry of our Advocate

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 love or forgiveness?
- How might your real, costly love for difficult people actually reassure you that you are His?