

One Another, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Love One Another

John 13:34–35

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This first lesson sets the foundation for the entire study, so what is doctrinally at stake here is large. John 13:34–35 gives us the new commandment, and your aim is to help students see why Jesus calls it new. The newness is not the bare idea of loving others, which the Law already taught (Leviticus 19:18). The newness is the measure and the source: “as I have loved you.” The love commanded is defined by the love Jesus displays in this very chapter, kneeling to wash feet, and supremely at the cross to which he is walking. Make sure students understand that Christian love is not first a feeling but a self-giving action that flows from Christ’s own self-giving, sealed in the new covenant he establishes in his blood.

A second doctrinal point belongs in your mind as you teach. Jesus makes love among his disciples the identifying mark of genuine discipleship: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” This is not love in the abstract or love for humanity in general, but love for one another within the one body of Christ. It is covenant love among the people God has joined together in the church. Keep that congregational, family shape in view throughout. The world’s evidence for the truth of the gospel is meant to be a community that loves like Jesus.

At the same time, this passage was never meant only to be analyzed. It was spoken to weak and frightened men, one of whom was about to deny the Lord, to form them into a people who love. So aim past information toward transformation. Your students do not merely need to define the new commandment correctly. They need to walk out loving the specific, difficult, ordinary people in their own congregation. Hold the doctrine and the heart together: the truth of Christ’s love for us is exactly what fuels our love for one another.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus calls this a “new” command, yet “love your neighbor as yourself” was already written in the Law (Leviticus 19:18). In what sense is this command genuinely new? Consider the words “as I have loved you” as you answer.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by acknowledging what the student likely already senses: love of neighbor is not a New Testament invention. Leviticus 19:18 commanded it, and Jesus himself named it the second great commandment (Matthew 22:39). So the newness cannot lie simply in the bare instruction to love. Something deeper has changed.

The newness lies in the standard and in the source. The standard is now “as I have loved you.” The measure of our love is no longer ourselves (“as yourself”) but Christ. We are to love one another with the same quality of love that Jesus has poured out on us: love that serves, love that stoops, love that lays down its life. That is a far higher and costlier bar than self-love. It is the love of the cross becoming the pattern for the pew.

The newness also lies in the new covenant context. Jesus speaks these words at the Last Supper, as he institutes the memorial of his body and blood and inaugurates the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31. Under that covenant, God writes his law on the heart and pours his love into his people. The command is new because it belongs to a new order of things, a new people being formed by a new and better covenant in Christ's blood.

Help students see that newness is therefore both a gift and a calling. We can love this way only because we have first been loved this way. The command flows downhill from the cross. Press them to feel the difference between “love others as you love yourself” and “love others as Christ has loved you.” The second is impossible apart from grace, and it reshapes everything.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new commandment as belonging to the new covenant in Christ's blood (Luke 22:20; Jeremiah 31:31–34)
- Christ's self-giving love, shown in foot washing and the cross, as the measure of Christian love (John 13:1–17; John 15:13)
- The continuity and the advance between the Law's command to love the neighbor and Christ's command to love as he loved (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39)
- Love as a fruit produced in those who have been born again into Christ, not a work we generate on our own (Galatians 5:22; 1 John 4:19)
- The danger of reducing Christian love to mere sentiment or to a vague goodwill that costs nothing

Discussion Prompts

- What practical difference does it make to be told to love others “as Christ loved you” rather than “as you love yourself”?
- Why is it important that this command is rooted in the cross and the new covenant, and not just in a general call to be nice?
- Where do you see the difference between sentimental love and the self-giving love Jesus models in this chapter?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think honestly about the last week of your life inside the church family. Where did your love look more like polite tolerance than the active, stooping love Jesus describes? Name one concrete moment.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and the goal is honesty rather than guilt. Many of us have quietly settled for a church-shaped politeness: we are civil, we smile on Sunday, we avoid open conflict, and we call it love. Jesus describes something far more active and costly. Help students name the gap without shaming them.

Draw out the contrast between tolerance and love. Tolerance puts up with people from a safe distance. The love of John 13 closes the distance, kneels down, and serves. Tolerance asks, “Can I avoid friction with this person?” Love asks, “How can I lay down something of myself for this person’s good?” Most of us are far more practiced at the first than the second.

Move the conversation toward hope and concreteness. The point is not to wallow in failure but to let an honest look drive us back to Christ’s love and then out toward a specific person. Encourage students to picture an actual face, an actual moment in the past week, where polite distance could have become active love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between worldly tolerance and Christlike love
- Love as active and costly service rather than mere conflict avoidance (1 John 3:18)
- Self-examination as a normal and healthy part of the Christian walk (2 Corinthians 13:5)
- The grace of Christ as the remedy for our failures to love, not our own resolve alone

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference, in everyday church life, between tolerating someone and loving them?
- Why is it easy to mistake politeness for genuine Christian love?
- What is one small, concrete act of love you could offer this week to someone you have only been tolerating?

Question 3

Student Question:

Look closely at the scene around these verses. Jesus has just washed his disciples’ feet, and he is hours from the cross. How does the setting itself define what he means by love, and why can we not separate this command from his example?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Slow down and let the students sit in the scene. John has framed the command deliberately. Just before it, Jesus rises from washing feet, the task of the lowest household servant, and explains that he has given them an example to follow (John 13:14–15). Just after it, he predicts Peter's denial and walks toward Gethsemane and Golgotha. The command to love is set like a jewel between the basin and the cross.

So the setting is the definition. When Jesus says "as I have loved you," he is pointing at what he is doing right then and what he is about to do. His love takes off its robe and kneels in the dirt. His love serves the very man who will betray him. His love refuses to grasp at status and instead pours itself out. We cannot lift the words "love one another" out of this scene and fill them with our own softer meaning.

Connect this to the larger movement of John's Gospel. John 13:1 says that having loved his own, Jesus "loved them to the end," and the rest of the chapter shows what that looks like. The love commanded in verse 34 is the love demonstrated in verses 1 through 17 and consummated at the cross. Example and command belong together.

Press the application. Because the command is wedded to the example, Christian love will always have a downward, serving shape. It looks like taking the lower place, doing the unseen task, and absorbing the cost rather than passing it on. Ask students where the "basin and towel" shape is missing in how they love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The foot washing as a deliberate model of humble, serving love (John 13:1–17)
- The cross as the supreme demonstration and definition of love (John 15:13; Romans 5:8)
- The unity of Christ's command and Christ's example: he calls us to what he himself has done
- Humility and lowliness as essential to genuine Christian love (Philippians 2:3–8)
- Love that serves even those who will fail or wrong us, as Jesus served Judas and Peter

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Jesus defined love by washing feet rather than by giving a definition?
- How does the nearness of the cross shape the way we should hear "love one another"?
- Where in your life is the "basin and towel" shape of love most missing right now?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus measures our love by his own: "as I have loved you." Where is your love for fellow Christians still mostly a warm feeling, and where has it actually cost you something in time, money, comfort, or pride?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the measure of verse 34 into the student's checkbook, calendar, and ego. It is easy to feel affection for the church in the abstract. It is another thing to let love interrupt our schedule, open our wallet, or wound our pride. Help students test their love by its cost.

Use 1 John 3:16–18 as a lens. John says we know love by the fact that Christ laid down his life, and then immediately turns to very ordinary costs: sharing our goods with a brother in need. Love that never reaches the practical level of time, money, and comfort has not yet grown into what Jesus commands.

Be pastorally careful here. The aim is not to manufacture guilt but to invite growth. Affection is not wrong; it is simply not the whole of love. Encourage students to identify one arena, time or money or comfort or pride, where Christ might be inviting them to let love cost something real.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love proven by sacrificial action, not merely by feeling (1 John 3:16–18)
- The laying down of self-interest as the pattern of Christ's love (Philippians 2:4–8)
- Generosity, hospitality, and practical service as ordinary expressions of love in the body
- Pride as a chief obstacle to the costly love Jesus commands

Discussion Prompts

- When has loving a fellow Christian actually cost you something? What did you learn?
- Why is affection alone not enough to fulfill the command to love as Christ loved?
- Which is harder for you to surrender in love: your time, your money, your comfort, or your pride?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Why would the Lord make love among believers, rather than knowledge or zeal, the great identifying mark of his people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw attention to how striking this is. Jesus could have named many badges of discipleship: sound doctrine, miraculous power, zeal for truth, careful obedience. All of these matter. Yet he singles out love for one another as the mark the watching world will read. Ask why love, of all things, carries this weight.

One answer is that love most clearly reflects the character of God himself. "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and the gospel is the story of his love poured out in Christ. When a community loves like

Jesus, it makes the invisible God visible. Knowledge can be imitated and zeal can be counterfeited, but a community that genuinely lays down its life for one another is hard to fake and unmistakably divine.

Be careful to keep balance. Jesus is not setting love against truth or sound teaching. In John's Gospel, love and obedience to his word are inseparable (John 14:15). The point is not that doctrine does not matter but that doctrine which never produces love among the brethren has missed its goal. Right belief is meant to bear the fruit of right love.

Bring it home to the congregation. The evangelistic credibility of the local church rests in part on this. A congregation that argues, gossips, and divides undermines its own witness, however correct its teaching. A congregation that visibly loves commends the gospel before a word is spoken. Love is not a substitute for truth; it is the truth made visible.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love for one another as the distinguishing mark of true discipleship (John 13:35)
- The inseparable link between loving Christ and keeping his word (John 14:15, 23)
- The witness of a loving congregation to the watching world (John 17:20–23)
- God's own character of love as the source and pattern of the church's love (1 John 4:7–8)
- The danger of orthodoxy without love, which fails to reach the goal of the gospel (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is love harder to counterfeit than knowledge or zeal?
- How does a loving congregation strengthen, rather than weaken, its witness to the truth?
- What happens to a church's testimony when sound teaching is not matched by love?

Question 6

Student Question:

If an unbeliever quietly watched how you speak about and act toward the members of your congregation, what would they conclude about whether you belong to Jesus? Be specific about what they would see.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns verse 35 into a mirror. Jesus says the world will know his disciples by their love. So the searching question is what the world would actually conclude from watching us. Encourage students to think not about their intentions but about the observable evidence: words, tone, actions, how they speak of others when those others are not present.

Press the matter of speech in particular. Much of how we treat one another shows up in how we talk about each other, in the car on the way home, in private conversations, in the things we let

slip. An outsider learns a great deal about our love by listening to our words about fellow members. James warns that the tongue reveals the heart (James 3:9–10).

Keep the tone hopeful and formational. The goal is not despair but a renewed desire to let love be visible. Invite students to imagine one relationship where, if a watching neighbor saw it clearly, it would point unmistakably to Christ, and to ask what would make that true.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The observable, public nature of Christian love as a witness (Matthew 5:16)
- The revealing power of our speech about one another (James 3:9–12; Ephesians 4:29)
- Integrity between our profession of faith and our treatment of the brethren (1 John 4:20)
- The believer's life as a letter the world reads (2 Corinthians 3:2–3)

Discussion Prompts

- What do your words about other members, spoken when they are not present, reveal about your love?
- If a neighbor watched you for a month, what would they conclude about your discipleship?
- What is one relationship you would want a watching world to see, and what needs to change for that?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus gives this command on the very night Judas betrays him and Peter denies him. What does it tell us about the nature of this love that he commands it knowing his disciples will fail him within hours?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the timing land with full weight. Jesus is not naive about the men in front of him. He has just identified his betrayer, and he tells Peter plainly that he will deny him three times. Knowing all of this, he still kneels to wash their feet and still commands them to love one another. His love is not contingent on their faithfulness.

This guards us against a fragile, conditional love that waits for others to prove worthy first. The love Jesus models and commands moves toward people before they have earned it and even when they will let us down. It is the love of Romans 5:8, love for us while we were still sinners. In the church, this means loving people who are still being sanctified, who will disappoint us, who are works in progress just as we are.

Apply this to the realities of congregational life. People in the body will fail us. Brothers and sisters will say the wrong thing, forget us in our need, and occasionally wound us. The command

to love is given precisely for a community of imperfect people. Jesus is not asking us to love an ideal church but the real one.

Anchor the hope in Christ's own restoring love. Peter denied, but Jesus sought him out and restored him (John 21). The same patient, pursuing love we have received is the love we are to extend. We love failing people because we ourselves are failing people who have been loved to the end.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's love as unconditional in its initiative, given before and apart from our worthiness (Romans 5:8)
- The call to love fellow Christians who are imperfect and still being sanctified
- Christ's restoring, pursuing love seen in his treatment of Peter (John 21:15–19)
- The difference between love that waits to be earned and love that takes the first step
- Patience and forbearance as expressions of love within the body (Colossians 3:13)

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change your love to remember that Jesus loved his disciples knowing they would fail him?
- Where are you tempted to make your love conditional on others proving worthy first?
- Who in the body needs you to take the first step of love, before they have earned it?

Question 8

Student Question:

Is there a relationship in the body of Christ that has grown cold, strained, or distant? What is one step of love, not just feeling but action, that you could take toward that person this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves from understanding to obedience. Most students will be able to think of at least one relationship in the church that has cooled. The aim is to help them see that the command to love is not fulfilled by waiting for warm feelings to return but by taking a concrete step of love now.

Help them see that action often leads feeling, not the other way around. We tend to wait until we feel like loving someone. Jesus commands the action, trusting that obedient love, expressed in a phone call, a kind word, a request for forgiveness, or an act of service, is itself the path along which the heart is reshaped. Love is something we do before it is something we feel.

Be practical and gentle. Some strained relationships involve real hurt, and a single step will not resolve everything. The point is not to demand instant reconciliation but to ask for one honest,

doable step in the direction of love. Encourage students to name the person privately and to name the step.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love as obedient action that can move ahead of feeling (John 13:34; 1 John 3:18)
- The call to pursue reconciliation within the body (Matthew 5:23–24; Romans 12:18)
- The Spirit's work of producing love in us as we obey (Galatians 5:22)
- Forbearance and the active healing of strained relationships among Christians

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it a mistake to wait for warm feelings before acting in love?
- What is one concrete, doable step toward a strained relationship that you could take this week?
- How might obedient action begin to reshape the way your heart feels toward that person?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus issues love as a command, not as an optional emotion, yet he roots it in his own love for us and in the new covenant he is about to seal in his blood. How does grounding our love in Christ's love for us, and in our shared life in his one body, keep this command from collapsing into either cold duty or empty sentiment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, so give it room. The question holds together two truths that are easy to pull apart. On one side, love is genuinely commanded; it is not a mood we wait for but an obligation laid on every disciple. On the other side, love is rooted in grace; it flows from Christ's prior love for us and from the new covenant life we share in his body. Help students hold both.

Show how grounding love in Christ's love rescues it from cold duty. If love were only a command, we would obey it grudgingly, like paying a tax. But Jesus does not start with bare command. He starts with a basin, a towel, and a cross, and he says, "as I have loved you." We love because we have first been loved (1 John 4:19). The command comes wrapped in grace, so obedience becomes grateful response rather than joyless labor.

Then show how grounding love in the new covenant rescues it from empty sentiment. Sentiment is a feeling that floats free of commitment and costs nothing. But this love belongs to a covenant sealed in blood and lived out in one body. We are not free-floating individuals having nice feelings about one another; we are members of one body, bound together in Christ (1

Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:5). Covenant love has shape, obligation, and staying power that mere sentiment never has.

Tie this to the church of Christ conviction about how we enter that body. We are baptized into Christ and into the one body (Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 6:3–4), and from that union flows a shared life of love. This love is therefore neither a private feeling nor a heavy rule, but the natural overflow of belonging to Christ and to one another. Help students feel the difference: not duty without warmth, not warmth without commitment, but covenant love that both commands and delights.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love as both a binding command and a grateful response to grace (John 13:34; 1 John 4:19)
- The new covenant in Christ's blood as the ground of the new commandment (Luke 22:20)
- Believers united in one body, into which we are baptized, as the context of "one another" love (1 Corinthians 12:12–13; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27)
- The error of reducing love either to joyless duty or to commitment-free sentiment
- Christ's prior love as the wellspring that makes obedience to the command possible
- Covenant love marked by commitment, permanence, and shared life, not passing feeling

Discussion Prompts

- How does remembering that "we love because he first loved us" change love from a burden into a response?
- Why does belonging to one body give Christian love a staying power that mere sentiment lacks?
- Where do you tend to drift: toward loveless duty, or toward warm feelings that never act?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across John 13:34–35 as a whole: a new command, the measure of Christ's own love, and love as the badge of discipleship. Name one specific way you sense Jesus calling you to grow in love through this passage, and what you will do about it.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks the student to gather up the whole lesson into one concrete commitment. Resist the urge to let it stay general. "I want to love people more" is a wish, not a step. Help students name a specific person, a specific arena, and a specific action.

Encourage them to connect their answer to what struck them most in the passage. For one student it may be the foot washing and a call to humble service. For another it may be the measure "as I have loved you" and a call to let love cost something. For another it may be verse

35 and a call to guard their speech about fellow members. The text itself should drive the application.

Close the lesson by lifting their eyes back to Christ. The goal of this study is not behavior modification but becoming like Jesus. Remind students that the same Lord who commands this love supplies it through his Spirit and his ongoing work in them. Send them out not with a heavy burden but with a clear next step and a confident hope that Christ is forming them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The goal of the Christian life as growing conformity to Christ, including his love (Romans 8:29)
- The Holy Spirit's work in producing love in the obedient believer (Galatians 5:22)
- Personal, specific obedience as the proper response to Christ's word (James 1:22)
- Christ as both the pattern and the power of the love he commands

Discussion Prompts

- What single part of this passage pressed on your heart most, and why?
- What is the one specific step of love you will take, and when?
- How will you rely on Christ's Spirit, rather than your own willpower, as you take it?