

SMALL GROUP GUIDE

John's LETTERS

A STUDY ON 1, 2, & 3 JOHN

CIRCLE 01/03: **FIRST JOHN**

“Thanks for meeting with me,” a college student initiated while staring into his oat milk latte. I had no idea why he asked me to talk. Maybe he needed a wedding officiant, school advice, or just to catch up after five years. He refused to make eye contact at first, which led me to believe this was serious. He just swirled his white-and-green cup around like a tilt-a-whirl. “You okay, man?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Not really,” he gulped. “Recently, I realized that I do not believe in God, and my whole world is kind of shattering.” His voice shook with utter seriousness. I could tell he wasn’t looking for an argument or lecture. Honestly, he was hurt. In his mind, losing his faith was like losing a family member. His tone was packed with sorrow, longing, and fear of rejection. I assured him this was a healthy conversation before continuing: “Why is that?”

“God seems evil, mean, and hateful,” he explained.

“Oh, I don’t believe in that God either,” I interjected. His eyebrow raised before I carried on. “Whenever I speak to anyone who struggles with doubt, I ask them to define God. Why? Because after they do, I often conclude that their issue isn’t with God. It’s with their idea of God.”

Some people think of God as an angry parent, which He isn’t. Others imagine God as a judgmental boss, which He certainly isn’t. Some think of God as a genie who grants wishes and makes everything dandy, which He isn’t. An accurate view of God cultivates an authentic relationship with Him. That’s why theology, the study of God, is so important. Theology invites us to experience, explore, and embrace the true God, not the cultural constructs attached to Him.

This problem isn’t new, either. Distorted perspectives of God plagued the first-century Church, too. Fortunately for us, early pastors wrote letters to help us make sense of our theology and ultimately know God more intimately. That’s why we are about to dig into three Biblical letters written by the Apostle John. He was an elderly pastor who was worried about his spiritual children. They were not living right because they didn’t know the truth about God. These theologically-rich letters help us understand God’s character, our behavior, and how they intertwine.

READ: 1 John 4:7-10

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

First, Second, and Third John were personal letters written to challenge faulty views of Jesus. False teachers had woven a web of lies that made people question the core nature of Christ. John, late in his life, was dumbfounded by their distorted theology. He leapt into action. With aching joints and shaking hands, he penned three letters to help his friends make sense of God’s glory and their responsibility.

John intimately knew Jesus. He was in the group of three disciples in Jesus’s core inner circle who witnessed the moment of “transfiguration,” when Jesus’s appearance was radically transformed to shine like the sun (Mark 9:2-9). Matthew called John the disciple that Jesus loved. He personally walked with Jesus. He lovingly watched Him heal people, preach about the Kingdom, and show God’s compassion in every interaction. John even shared a few meals with Jesus after His resurrection.

To put it plainly, this was personal for John. He wrote these three epistles (a fancy word for letters) to help us know who Jesus is and how we should react. Why does John care so much about what we believe? Because our beliefs and behavior are profoundly related.

Theology changes your reality. When you believe in the right things, you behave the right way. John knew that and wanted to help his friends understand who God is and how they should react. Every passage within John’s epistles has the same setup— theology then practicality. In First John, he zooms in to examine the love of God and how it changes the lives of believers.

Theological Principle: God Is Love

As Christians, we all believe in God’s love. We use the word “love” like pizza shops use shredded cheese. Unfortunately, sometimes that truth never travels from our heads to our hearts. As you know, some people have a tragically distorted view of God. They

think He is mad at them, anxiously waiting to punish them, or even cold or distant. That's entirely not the case, though. When John talked about God's character, he said that God **is** love. It's not just something He does; it's His very identity. There is nothing you have to do to earn God's love—He just loves you.

Theologically, God's love is for everyone. That's why John says, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through Him" (1 John 4:9).

It's not about performance; it's about Jesus. There is nothing you can do to earn it and nothing you can do to lose it. Because of Jesus, nothing could ever separate you from God's love. God loves you— not some future version of you. Despite your disappointments and deficiencies, God loves you right now. Let God's love change the way you live.

This brings us to the practical principle behind the theological truth.

Practical Principle: If You Love God, Live Like It

God works both vertically and horizontally. What does that mean? We experience a gift from God (vertical), and then that changes how we treat others (horizontal). God's love was given to us undeservedly and unprecedentedly. What should we do with that gift? Heed the direction of John: share it with everyone. God's gift has "the whole world" written on the front of the card because He wants all humanity to experience the beauty and glory of His love.

That's where you come in. Share God's love with everyone. John set up an intentional parallel when he wrote, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God" (John 4:7). Since you have discovered God's love, you should disperse it.

God's love changes more than our conversations. It also changes our motivations. Why do we love others? Because God loved us first. Really let that sink in. If God loves you, then you must be worthy of affection. If God welcomes you, then you must be worth having around. If God speaks to you, then you must be worth talking to. Are you seeing this? A true experience with God's love propels you to change your thoughts and

feelings about others. God loves them, welcomes them, and wants a relationship with them. You should, too.

John's first letter forces us to connect theology to activity. When we learn about God, we learn how to behave. He urges us to see the world both vertically and horizontally. Our God is love embodied, meaning our lifestyles should affirm that. Since God loves you, live like it.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What's one thing that stood out from today's message?

Q2: Make a list of 5-10 things your group loves.

Q3: What are some faulty ways people view God?

Q4: What are some ways God has shown His love to you? What are some ways you can show God's love to others?

Q5: The Apostle John "forces us to connect theology to activity." What does this mean to you?

Application: Live a life of love this week. Find a way to show someone in your life the love of God.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

1 John 1:1-4

1 John 1:5-7

1 John 1:8-10

1 John 2:1-11

1 John 2:12-17

1 John 2:18-29

1 John 3:1-11

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 02/03: **SECOND JOHN**

As we continue our study of John's letters, you will notice something clear. John, the disciple that Jesus loved, fixates on the concept of love. If emojis were a thing back then, I am certain a few hearts would make their way onto these ancient pages. While First John focuses on our love for others and God, Second John begins showing how authentic love nudges us toward the other character traits of God as well. How does that work? A life built on the foundation of God's love inevitably produces other attributes like peace, joy, obedience, hospitality, and truth. They're all connected.

Connections—your brain is making them every minute of every day. You are constantly connecting dots, filling in blanks, putting ideas together, and connecting past memories to your present. It's why you likely try to finish people's sentences in your head when they're talking. Want proof? Let's play a word game. Fill in the blank for me:

Peanut butter and _____.

Salt and _____.

Macaroni and _____.

Batman and _____.

If you grew up in the States, you could likely fill in those blanks without even thinking. With zero context or clues, you could still come up with jelly, pepper, cheese, and Robin. Why? Because these words are intertwined and interconnected.

John taught that God's love is connected to truth just like peanut butter to jelly. In all three of John's epistles, he meshed truth and love together into a single idea. In the way breathing is made up of both inhaling and exhaling, God's design for human compassion requires both truth and love. In John's second letter, we read his most detailed explanation of this concept.

READ: 2 John 1:3-5

"Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love. I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another."

The second letter of John is the only part of the New Testament written directly to a woman. We can infer three things about the recipient from John's one-chapter letter. First, she was a woman who served in leadership at one of his churches. Second, she was the mother to a group of great kids. Third, this letter is the response to a previous letter addressing a concern she shared.

What was her concern? Many teachers were loving without walking in the truth. John wrote a warning that love without truth isn't really loving at all. Second John gives us three lessons for practicing true Christian compassion.

Avoid love without truth.

John's primary reason for writing was to address false teachers who were teaching a dangerous message about Jesus. John warned that "many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver..." (2 John 1:7).

Do you see John's problem? Deceivers came across as very loving but did not speak the truth. They were super nice people. They likely fed the poor, served the community, and comforted those in mourning. However, their message was not truthful. They were preaching false doctrine.

Speak the truth in love. Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is share a harsh truth. If someone is struggling with addiction, have an intervention. If a friend is going down a dangerous path, steer them in the right direction. If someone has adopted a dangerous philosophy, speak to them about it. True love allows a little friction.

Love without truth corrupts true compassion. However, the opposite is also true. This brings us to our second word of caution.

Avoid truth without love.

According to John's Gospel account, Jesus taught that He is "the way, the **truth**, and the life" (John 14:6). Jesus is truth embodied. What else did John show us? Jesus is love embodied, too. That means Jesus is both love and truth. As a follower of Christ, you are called to champion truth and love.

Love without truth is hollow; truth without love is harsh.

Whenever you share the truth with someone, it must start from a heart of love. As the atmosphere is to earth, love is to the truth. It surrounds it and protects it. Don't question someone without connecting with them first. Avoid calling people out for something you also secretly struggle with. Always speak with kindness, grace, and tenderness—especially in the context of correction. So, then, what should we do? Embrace both.

Always act in truth and love.

Truth requires love. Love requires truth. They're deeply interconnected. You must pursue truth and love at the same time. Don't minimize one to maximize the other because each trait depends on the other.

Your life's goal is truth and love. If a teacher graded this message like a paper, they might circle my use of singular verbs and nouns. According to conventional grammar rules, the sentence should read, "Your goals are both truth and love." However, that's not correct in this instance. They're bonded. To pursue both is a singular ambition.

Perhaps it makes sense on paper, but what does it look like in practice? Allow John's message to invade your life and eradicate love without truth or truth without love. If you need to have a tough talk with someone, be sure to start with the language of love. That's speaking the truth in love. If you care about someone, point out places in their life where they need to change. That's letting love lead you to speak truth.

You've heard the song "All You Need Is Love." It's cute, but it's not true. People need the truth just as much as they need love. The truth is that Jesus died for them. The truth is that Jesus is the way to the Father. The truth is that God wants you to live a life of holiness and wholeness.

Love changes us. Truth challenges us. John wants us to know that truth and love are different sides of the same coin. If we want to stand for truth, we need to be rooted in love. If we want to show love, we may need to speak uncomfortable truths. The opening stanza of John's second letter will be the closing sentence of this message:

“The truth lives in us and will be with us forever Grace, mercy, and peace, which come from God the Father and from Jesus Christ—the Son of the Father—will continue to be with us who live in truth and love.” (2 John 1:2).

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What's one thing that stood out from today's message?

Q2: We talked about words that are commonly associated with each other, such as peanut butter and jelly, salt and pepper, etc. Can you name any more?

Q3: Why do you think John taught us that love and truth are intertwined?

Q4: What is an example of speaking truth without love? What is an example of showing love without truth?

Q5: Let's say you have a dear friend who is struggling with a sin issue. What does it sound like to speak the truth in love?

Application: Speak the truth in love to someone this week, whether it's sharing the gospel, speaking up about a perceived problem, or opening up about your struggles.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

1 John 3:11-24

1 John 4:1-6

1 John 4:7-15

1 John 6:16-21

1 John 5:1-5

1 John 5:6-12

1 John 5:13-21

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 03/03: **THIRD JOHN**

“What’re these?” I questioned while helping my mother clean out her storage closet. I dusted off an ornate chest and curiously lifted the lid. A plume of dust lifted from the treasure chest. I was shocked at what we uncovered. It wasn’t gold, gems, or some old VHS tapes. We had discovered my grandmother’s hope chest from when she was dating my grandpa.

“There have to be hundreds of letters in here,” my mother remarked with tears in her eyes. While they’d look like scrappy pieces of paper to most people, they were so much more than that to my mom. Both her parents passed away a long time ago, so this was a nostalgic look into the past. “Notice the date,” my mom said, motioning to the top of a tan envelope with a U.S. army seal. “This was from the war,” she concluded.

My grandfather served in WW2 while only a teenager. During this time, he was sending weekly letters to his girlfriend named Marianne—my grandma. Reading these letters was like stepping into a time machine. There were tales of war, descriptions of strange foods, and a fair bit of sappy sayings. Even though my grandfather passed before my birth, reading his letters transported me to a different era. It was almost like my Grandpa Jack was sitting next to me in a green uniform, sharing war stories.

First, Second, and Third John are personal letters. They are likely just samples of decades-long exchanges between John and his team of church leaders. Studying these books is like studying a postcard from a late relative. It sweeps you away to another era in history. Every word teaches you a lesson and connects you to something much larger than yourself. In John’s case, it’s the Church.

Clocking in at less than 300 words, the book of Third John is short. You can read the whole letter in about two minutes. John’s final epistle was written to a man named Gaius. Let’s see what John has to say.

READ: 3 John 1:5-6

“Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God.”

We know a lot about John. We encountered him as a young fisherman that dropped his nets to follow a prophet from Nazareth. We witnessed him at the foot of the cross weeping with Jesus's mother. We've read about his apocalyptic visions in Revelation. Now, we are seeing John as an elderly pen-wielding leader, mentor, and apostle.

Alternatively, we don't know much about Gaius. Many scholars assume that he may be a pastor John mentored, a missionary assistant with Paul, a deacon at the church in Corinth, or a hostel owner who housed traveling Christian missionaries. Whomever Gaius was, John clearly cherished him. Unlike the rest of John's writing, this letter is laser-focused. John wanted to thank Gaius for welcoming, hosting, and feeding so many missionaries. Simply put, Gaius was a good man.

What good is a letter without a little bit of tension, though? Fortunately for us, Third John brings the drama. John called someone out in the body of his letter. His name was Diotrephes. In John's eyes, Diotrephes was the exact opposite of Gaius. One served, and the other was selfish. One loved people and the other loved popularity. One spread truth, and the other spread gossip.

Why did John feel the need to put Diotrephes on blast? Because he wanted to be sure Gaius chose the right people to influence him. That's where this personal letter becomes practical for us. What character traits are we looking for in our friendships? If verses five and six tell us what to seek, verses nine and ten tell us what to avoid.

READ: 3 John 1:9-10

"I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers..."

Here John puts a principle from his previous letter into practice. He has to speak the "truth in love." His message is blunt: "Watch out for people like Diotrephes!" What exactly are we watching out for? When describing the two men, we see four contrasting character traits. Why do we need to dig into John's personality parallel? These are the types of individuals we want to influence us, too. Be sure to make the right choice.

Seek people who serve instead of being selfish.

John pointed out that one of the men loves to “put himself first.” Gaius loved serving people. Diotrephes loved the spotlight. Gaius’s hospitality was exemplary. He welcomed strangers, cooked their meals, stocked his cupboards with fruit snacks, and ensured everyone was comfortable. Diotrephes didn’t do any of that. He’d shove anyone out of the way to bask in the glow of glory. This character trait made John righteously angry.

There is no room for spotlight hogs in God’s Kingdom. We are called to love people, serve others, show hospitality, and prioritize community over popularity. It makes sense on paper but can be difficult in practice.

Hospitality is at the core of our calling, but our culture craves isolation and individualism. You’ve probably seen this without even realizing it. People wear earbuds everywhere, remain glued to their phones at the dinner table, and communicate via short texts. There’s an obsession with isolation.

God called you to be different. Hospitality should be your priority. Welcome others. Serve others. Love others. Share meals often. When you study the New Testament, you’ll see the early church valued tables over temples. The living room was their sanctuary. The dinner table was their lobby. The city streets were their mission field. They were not bound to buildings because no building could contain all God was doing.

That’s why hospitality was so important to John. It was the lifeblood of the local church. It should be the same today, too. Not everyone is called to be a pastor, foreign missionary, or worship leader. Nevertheless, we are all called to be hospitable. Open up your home. Invite new people over. Share a meal with your small group. Pray on your back porch. Be like Gaius. Practice radical hospitality at every opportunity.

The Church is not made up of four walls, a couple hundred chairs, or two services. It’s people. God’s Church is made up of God’s children. That’s why John also warned about a character trait that threatens to hurt the church. How? Because it hurts people.

Seek people who are merciful instead of judgmental.

Diotrephes allowed jealousy to lead to judgment. He was known for sharing harsh judgments about members of the church, leaders of the church, and even an elder from the church named John. Apparently, John heard about Dio's rumors, and his personal postcard got awkward. John was disgusted that Diotrephes was "spreading malicious nonsense about us." Simply put, the guy was judgmental and a gossip.

There's something sickly satisfying about judging others. It's a sin that people can secretly love without knowing it. You've inevitably seen this in your social spheres. We sneer at someone's weird outfit. We laugh at their personality quirks. We remind everyone of their past failures. We elevate their shortcomings for all to see. From a burn book in youth group to a hushed conversation in the lobby, judgment hurts the Church.

Have you ever realized that your friends form your mood and attitude? It's subtle but destructive. Criticism is contagious. When one person starts doing it, the whole group tends to follow suit. Next thing you know, you've spent half an hour belittling people instead of loving them. Stop the cycle. Since judgment is contagious, kindness is the cure. When you notice a conversation gets unnecessarily critical, steer it toward mercy, empathy, and courtesy. I assure you, kindness will change the course of the conversation. Love trumps hate every single time.

Did you see how we both started and ended with love? If you haven't noticed, that's John's obsession. Since "God is love," He wants us to emulate a life of love. Since we know the God of love, we are people of love. Since we follow the God of mercy, we are merciful. Since we worship a God who welcomes all, we do the same. Our lives should show that we know God.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What's one thing that stood out from today's message?

Q2: What was the overall message of Third John? Can you sum it up in one sentence?

Q3: Why do you think hospitality was so important to John?

Q4: How can you be more welcoming and hospitable this week?

Q5: What should you do when conversations get judgmental? How can you change the tone?

Application: Be hospitable this week. Plan a dinner party, invite someone to sit with you, or write encouraging letters to your friends.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

2 John 1:1

2 John 1:2-6

2 John 1:7-13

3 John 1:1-4

3 John 1:5-10

3 John 1:11-14

John 10:11-12

Do the following with each passage:

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