

March 5
Lesson 1

PERFECT LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 40:1-10

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 John 4:7-19

1 JOHN 4:7-19

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

KEY VERSE

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.—1 John 4:11

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Tell why the author (John) is known as “the apostle of love.”
2. Explain why the fact that God is love does not exclude his also being wrathful.
3. Make a plan to participate in a ministry of his or her church that shows God’s love in tangible ways.



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LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. First Love
- B. Lesson Background

I. Goal (1 John 4:7-12)

- A. Source of Love (vv. 7, 8)
 - Visible Love*
- B. Demonstrator of Love (vv. 9, 10)
 - God's Anguish, and Ours*
- C. Perfector of Love (vv. 11, 12)

II. Results (1 John 4:13-19)

- A. Gift (v. 13)
- B. Testimony (v. 14)
- C. Refuge (vv. 15, 16)
- D. Fearlessness (vv. 17, 18)
- E. Love (v. 19)

Conclusion

- A. Hard Love
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. First Love

Is there such a thing as mutual “love at first sight”? Psychologists debate the idea. Fans of romance endorse it. Filmmakers often employ the possibility as a plot device. Some happily married couples affirm it was true for them.

But relationships don’t usually work this way. Far more common is for one person to be attracted to another and thereby begin a courtship to convince the other. One person loves first; the other person comes to love later.

In today’s lesson, John uses this sequencing of love, but he is not writing about the romantic love that men and women have for each other. Rather, he is explaining our relationship with our loving God. He expresses this with one of the Bible’s classic verses, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

We do not need to attract God’s attention and convince him to love us. He has loved us from the start. God knows us before we are born (Psalm 139:13-16). That fact is more astonishing than even “love at first sight”!

B. Lesson Background

The three letters we call 1, 2, and 3 John name no author, but tradition attributes them to the apostle John. As he wrote those letters sometime after AD 90, he likely was the last of Jesus’ original 12 disciples still living.

At some point, John relocated from the setting of his account of Jesus (the Gospel of John), which was mainly Judea and Jerusalem. Tradition tells us that he went to Ephesus, a large, prosperous city in the western part of what is now Turkey. John became involved in the daily lives of the Christians in the area. We might say he “ministered in the trenches” where people struggled to live.

Rivals in this arena contradicted the teachings of John despite his credentials. Experienced ministers know there will be factions within a church, and some will oppose them for various reasons. The reasons for such opposition may be valid or concocted, but the opposition is real. It can sometimes grow into outright animosity and divisiveness.

John’s letters give evidence of such antagonism (3 John 9). Some of this was surely caused by false teachers whom John denounced (2 John 10), but there seems to have been other reasons too. Perhaps the aged apostle was seen as out of touch by other leaders who wanted to take the churches in new directions (note that the six churches of Revelation 2:8-3:22 are all within 120 miles of Ephesus and its church that is addressed in 2:1-7). Responding to such impatience is an underlying tone in 1 John, for the author repeatedly returns to the unchanging, ever loving, and always faithful God as the model for relationships within the church.

One caution: John likes to use absolute statements that may seem at odds at first glance. He can say both “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and “God is love” (4:8, 16) without logical contradiction. This is a technique of his writing, and we should realize that his absolute statements about people will sometimes present us with polar opposites for effect. John, being very experienced at ministry, knew that there are shades of gray when it comes to people—their mixed motives, inconsistencies, etc. We will see John’s use of the absolute style in today’s lesson.

I. Goal

(1 JOHN 4:7-12)

A. Source of Love (vv. 7, 8)

^{7a} Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.

Dear friends, used several times in this letter, is a favorite expression of affection of John for his readers. What follows affirms that the church is the fellowship of the beloved—people who recognize and accept God’s love for them as they act in love for *one another*. This is John’s heart on display. The apostle, who has decades of ministry experience, knows that the mutual love he and his readers share has God as its ultimate source.

HOW TO SAY IT

Ephesians Ee-fee-zhunz.

Ephesus Ef-uh-sus.

Judea Joo-dee-uh.

^{7b} Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

This is one of John’s absolute statements, so we should read with care. At first glance it may seem to say that *everyone* on earth who demonstrates love has a personal relationship with the Lord, that loving behavior is proof that a person *knows God*. But we all have known people who demonstrate love toward others and yet have no relationship with God at all.

Instead, it’s the other way around: all who have been *born of God* (that is, Christian believers) are to demonstrate the love of God in their lives and relationships. The further point is that a lack of love among those who claim to be Christian indicates that their relationship with the Lord is not what it should be.

What Do You Think?

How can we demonstrate to unbelievers the difference between the love shown by God and that shown by the world? Why should we?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With regard to motive

With regard to degree

With regard to limitations

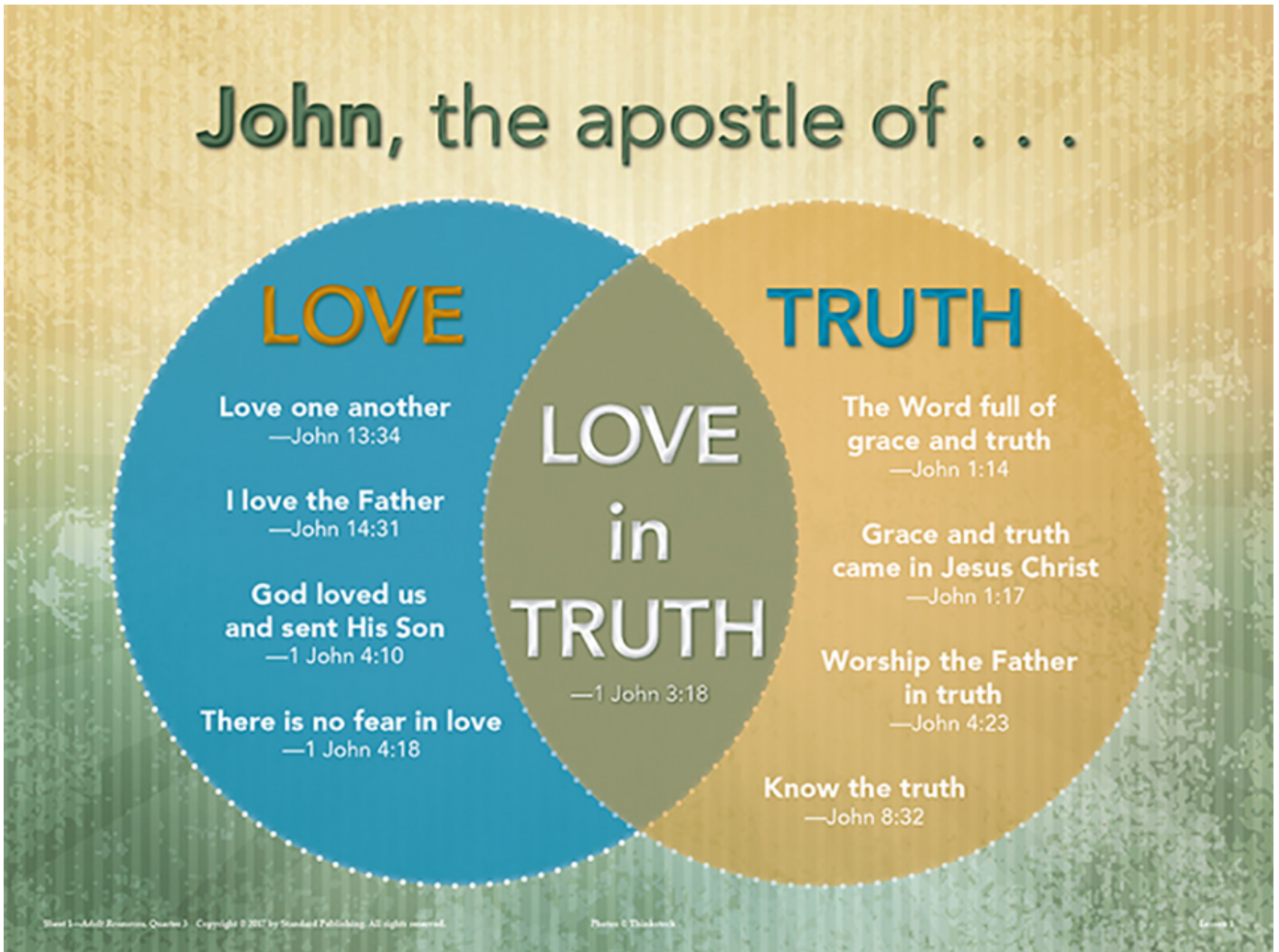
With regard to recipients

With regard to methods

8. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

John has sometimes been called “the apostle of love,” because of his frequent use of that word and concept in his writings. Indeed, some form of the word *love* occurs about two dozen times in today’s lesson text alone! But the churches in and around Ephesus seem to be lacking in love. John knows that love cannot be commanded, but it can be expected. His tone is not “I order you to love your brothers and sisters in Christ or else!” but rather “Why do you not love your fellow Christians?” This is a call for self-examination. To fail to be loving is to exclude God from one’s life, *because God is love*.

Other religions speak of love and the love of God. For example, Islam speaks of God’s mercy. But other religions would not agree with a statement as bold as *God is love* (also in v. 16). This is not merely “God is loving” or “God is capable of showing love.” And especially, it is not “love is God.” John presents a doctrinal truth that there is something essential and fundamental about the nature of God that cannot fully be explained. God did not learn how to love. God does not adopt love as a practical good. God does not merely choose to love. God is love! The implications of that statement should make our heads spin and our hearts skip beats!



Visual for Lesson 1. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “What happens to churches that get these two out of balance?”

VISIBLE LOVE

Because of work-related relocations, our family has experienced many seasons of “church shopping.” But even when we made correct doctrine our main criterion, we sometimes ended up in churches where biblical interpretations challenged those that we held. We have changed our thinking due to some teachings, yet we have held tightly to our understanding whenever we discovered an interpretive approach to the Bible to be deficient. We grew in both cases because we consulted God’s Word to determine whether what we held to be true matched his record of truth.

Today, we still seek sound doctrine when we need to find a new church family due to relocation. But we have added two more criteria. One considers how those of a particular church speak the name *Jesus*. Do they speak of him as they would of, say, Abraham Lincoln—as if discussing any “good” historical figure? Or does the way they say his name reflect the deep awe of love?

The other thing I look for is grace from those who serve up front during worship. Do the folks with the microphone speak about the love of God, yet also express disdain for other people or, in particular, various Christian organizations? If so, it’s a red flag.

A stress on knowledge (correct doctrine) is a good thing, but so is an emphasis on love. And the two are related! Notice how the author connects doctrinal knowledge (“we know that”) with love in [1 John 3:14](#); [5:2](#).—V. E.

What Do You Think?

What guardrails can we erect to ensure that we do not fail to show the love Christ desires?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

At work or school
 At home
 When gathered with other Christians
 Other

B. Demonstrator of Love (vv. 9, 10)

9. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

We might imagine John's opponents asking the questions skeptics ask today: "How do I know that God loves me? What about all the pain in my life?" Perhaps John's opponents try to explain the apparent mismatch of continued suffering and the doctrine of a loving God by teaching that claims about God's loving nature are irrelevant.

We deduce from the letter that the false teachers are saying that the way to salvation is through something other than faith in a God who loves. They do not teach that Jesus came to die for our sins, but to impart secret knowledge. What matters, they say, is being given secrets and insights that allow membership in a fellowship of spiritual elites.

John's response is to pull the reader back to the fact of history we see in the verse before us. How do we know God loves us? Because he sent *his one and only Son* on a mission to save the world ([John 3:16](#)). John draws a direct connection between Jesus' life and God's love.

10. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

John teaches, though, that it is not merely the life of Jesus, but his death that makes the difference. God did not send his Son just to teach us. He sent his Son to die for us "while we were still sinners," the great demonstration of God's eternal love ([Romans 5:8](#)).

This was not God's response to people's overtures of love. God was not obligated to humanity because people loved him dearly. To the contrary, humans repeatedly demonstrate hostility to God by sin, becoming his enemies ([Romans 5:10](#)).

John describes the intervention of Jesus as being *an atoning sacrifice for our sins*. The phrase *atoning sacrifice* means "an offering that turns away wrath." That's how Christ's death takes care of our sins. The God of love is also "a consuming fire" ([Hebrews 12:29](#)). Jesus' willing death satisfied sin's penalty (see [Romans 3:25, 26](#); [1 John 1:7](#); [2:2](#)). What greater love could there be?

GOD'S ANGUISH, AND OURS

Sociologist Brené Brown shares about a crisis her community experienced when she was a child. A family in her neighborhood suffered the death of their toddler in a tragic in-home accident. Brown recalls that a speaker at the church memorial service for the child said those gathered shouldn't grieve—that it was a time to celebrate, because this child was with God.

Brown became furious. But when she experienced a personal crisis as an adult, she returned to church. She said she went back for the wrong reasons, hoping for something like an epidural to take away life's pain. But what she found instead was more like a midwife—someone who sits beside you through the pain.

We live with the question of how God can be love yet be in control of a world so wracked with pain. The answer has several elements; one is to realize that God himself is not unfamiliar with pain. His justice requires punishment for sin, punishment that his Son paid on the cross. In Jesus, we see God willingly entering this world of pain to rescue us. We see yet more of the love of God when we realize that he stays with us and holds us through our grief. Jesus weeps with us, and that is what we are to do with each other ([Romans 12:15](#)). Love changes everything.—V. E.

C. Perfector of Love (vv. 11, 12)

11. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

John moves next to the application of this great truth about the love of God. When we become fully aware of the depth and magnitude of God's unmerited love for us, how can we fail to love our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Relationships among church members can be awkward. We all do stupid or silly things, and memories can be long. When we are unsure how to relate to each other, may we remember to lead with love. Don't fake love while harboring hate. Don't withhold your love to those you feel don't love you. Lead with love and you will be acting in a godly manner.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to reflect to others the love that God shows to us?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

To those sharing our faith and values

To those ambivalent to our faith and values

To those opposed to our faith and values

¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Since *no one has ever seen God* (compare [Exodus 33:20](#)), how can people be sure he exists? There is more than one way to answer this, and the one John offers here is that when we lead with love, we embody a characteristic of God to others in a tangible, visible manner. People experience the loving presence of God when believers act in love.

A good goal is to turn the conditional *if we love* into a concrete *when we love*. As we do, we prove God's presence in our lives. On the idea of love's being perfected, see [1 John 2:5](#) and (below) [4:17, 18](#).

II. Results

([1 JOHN 4:13-19](#))

A. Gift ([v. 13](#))

¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.

If we have doubts *that we live in God and he in us*, John provides the certainty: we know we are truly in fellowship with God because of the presence of *his Spirit*. This gift comes from God himself. We don't knock on the door of God's heart and ask to be let in; rather, it's the other way around (see [Revelation 3:20](#)). One implication of this fact is that loving others is not solely a matter of our determination and strength. God's indwelling Spirit assists us in leading with love.

B. Testimony ([v. 14](#))

¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

John and the other apostles saw God's Son in the flesh ([1 John 1:1](#)). Jesus is the focus of God's love, the expression of God's love to us. God proves his love to us by sending *his Son* to save the world ([John 3:16](#)). We prove our love to God by believing John's testimony and by replicating God's love to others.

C. Refuge ([vv. 15, 16](#))

^{15, 16} If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

John now ties three things together: (1) our confessed belief *that Jesus is the Son of God*, (2) the mutual dwelling of God in us (through his Spirit) and we in God (through our faith), and (3) the uniting factor of *love*. To say *God is love* is not an abstract concept. It is the basis for our lives.

How do we get to know God better, to have a closer relationship with him? There may be more than one answer to this, but John is teaching here that our relationship with God grows deeper when we love others. Teresa of Calcutta, the tireless servant of the poor, said of the children she served, "Each one of them is Jesus in disguise." This outlook reflects [Matthew 25:31-46](#), discussed below.

What Do You Think?

How can our church demonstrate love more effectively as a witness that Jesus is the Son of God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With actions seen primarily by fellow believers

With actions seen primarily by unbelievers

D. Fearlessness ([vv. 17, 18](#))

^{17a} This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment:

John now gives a standard whereby we can test the validity of our faith: our fear of judgment from God (or lack of it). If we are living out the love of God, we will be bold on God's *day of judgment*. We have a confidence that comes from knowing we are loving like God. We will be bold rather than fearful, because we know our judgment will be positive.

John certainly remembers that Jesus gave his disciples a picture of final judgment that must have surprised them. Jesus taught that

judgment would not be based on keeping the commandments of the law, but on loving actions that reveal faith in Christ (see [Matthew 25:31-46](#)). The Judgment Day question “Did you love?” will trump “Did you keep the law?” although the two are interrelated ([Matthew 22:36-40](#)). If we do not love, we certainly should fear judgment, for it is coming and it is sure.

What Do You Think?

How do we evangelize those who have no fear of judgment but should?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Responding to statements that begin “Surely a loving God would not ...”

Considering the role of our loving acts

Grappling with emotionally driven beliefs

Other

^{17b} **In this world we are like Jesus.**

Jesus understood that he was sent to save a world that did not accept him ([John 1:10, 11](#)). We ourselves are only temporary citizens in this hostile world. As Peter wrote, we are “foreigners and exiles” ([1 Peter 2:11](#)) in a world that does not understand unselfish Christian love.

¹⁸ **There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.**

At this point in the line of thought, John does not see the opposite of *love* as hate, but *fear* (contrast [1 John 4:20](#)). This resonates with us as we consider how often we fail to do the loving thing because we are afraid. How often do we look back on an encounter when we hesitated for fear of rejection or ridicule and see that an opportunity to show love was lost?

True love is fearless. We do not fear God’s judgment and we do not fear rejection of others if we are full of love. Love overcomes fear. The answer to fear in relationships is love.

As we contemplate this, we realize that we will always have some fear in our relationships in this life. We see here another one of John’s absolute statements: *there is no fear in love*. We should not expect to be *perfect* in this life, but that’s no reason to lower the standard. We are to move closer to that goal all the time ([Matthew 5:48](#)). Heaven will be a place of perfection, and that certainly means, among other things, there will be no more fear.

E. Love (v. 19)

¹⁹ **We love because he first loved us.**

John ends this section with a marvelously succinct summary. Love has a source for us. That source is God. We ourselves seem to be programmed for selfishness. True love begins with God. Our understanding of what love is depends on our understanding of God. When we understand the fact that God loved us so much that he gave his Son to save us, then we begin to fathom the true nature of love. Knowing God means knowing love. Loving God means loving others.

VISUALS FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 236) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Spring Quarter. That packet also contains the very useful *Presentation Tools* CD for teacher use. Order No. 3629117 from your supplier.

Conclusion

A. Hard Love

Some people are hard to love. A woman in a church where I ministered (I’ll call her Diane) was consistently mean to my family and me. I do not know why. She said unnecessarily critical things about my wife. She spread rumors about me that were not true. She never had a good word to say about my sermons, only condescending complaints.

Whenever I offered a kindness to her, Diane responded with suspicion. Any soft words said to her were rejected. She was hard to love. I wish I could say that eventually I wore down Diane with my love and we became friends, but that never happened. Yet I can say that I never returned her meanness with meanness of my own. While I tired of her behavior, I did not fear or hate her.

I think that God must feel that way toward us sometimes. We are hard to love. We are selfish. We are unfaithful. We act out of fear. Yet he still loves us. His love is never failing, perfect, and inexhaustible. May we not resist God’s love, and instead, may we follow his example.

B. Prayer

Holy God, you are ever loving, but at times we are the opposite. We are selfish, bitter, jealous, petty. We are many things that would never be called “love.” Teach us to be like you in loving others. Help us love even those friends and family who are very difficult to love. Make us more like you, the source and the goal of all our love. We pray this in the name of the greatest expression of your love, your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Let God’s love for you be an endless source of your love for others.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Start class by dividing students into two groups for a mini debate. Say, “The proposition for the debate is this: Two people often fall in love at first sight.” *Group 1* will develop an argument for the proposition; *Group 2* will develop an argument against the proposition.

Allow each group a minute to present its argument, and then give each Group 30 seconds to rebut the opposing group’s argument.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Key Word” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Probably no learner will be familiar with every song title listed, but all will recognize that *love* is the word that is missing from each of the song titles. Briefly discuss what some of these titles say about love.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study, saying, “Everyone wants to be loved. People have very different opinions about love. But what is real love? How can we love others? What are the results of having real love in one’s life? The apostle John addressed these questions in today’s Bible text.”

Into the Word

Draw a Venn diagram of three intersecting circles on the board. Label circles in this way:

We can KNOW what love is (1 John 4:7-10).

We can SHOW love to the world (vv. 11-15.)

We can GROW in love (vv. 16-19).

In the intersection of all three circles write “JESUS.”

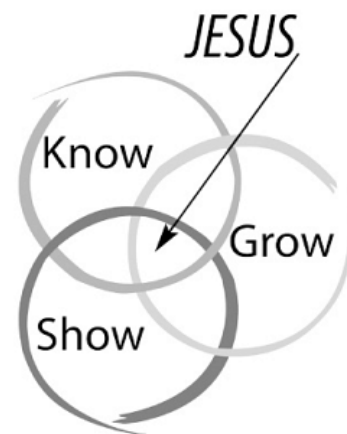
Divide the class into three groups, assign each group one of the three circles of the diagram. Have groups read their assigned text, summarize how the text supports the statement in their portion of the diagram, and show how Jesus is key in fulfilling that statement.

After small-group discussion, ask a speaker from each group to share his or her group’s findings.

Group 1—We can KNOW what love is—Love does not come from our nature, but comes from God. We can love by being reborn of God. This happens when we accept the ultimate demonstration of love—Jesus’ dying to pay for our sins!

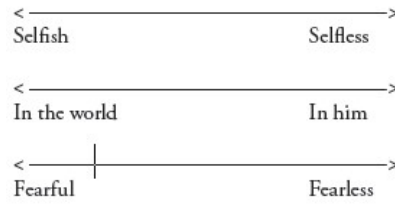
Group 2—We can SHOW love to the world—Though the world cannot see God, it can see us and how we love each other! We testify that we can love more completely because Jesus, God’s Son, lives in us and empowers us through the Spirit.

Group 3—We can GROW in love—As our confidence grows in God’s love, we can rely on that love. The more we love others in this world, the more we reflect Jesus’ love for the world. Like Jesus, we give our lives away without fear, trusting God will grant us eternal life.



Into Life

Draw these three scales on the board:



Allow time for learners to evaluate themselves on each of these scales. Then have them gather with one or two other classmates to share their evaluations and to pray for one another.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Justice and Mercy” activity from the reproducible page. Have students work individually or in small groups to read the verses cited in this activity.