

## Small Group Leaders Notes

### 1 John 4:1-21

#### **Context**

Throughout the letter John is writing to reassure his readers that they are genuine Christians who have heard and believed the genuine gospel. To do this he shows us the key marks of both true and false Christianity. Genuine Christianity is marked by Christ-like love (1:5-6, 1:10, 3:14, 3:17-18), obedience (2:3, 3:6, 3:9-10) and holding onto the apostolic truth that John and the other apostles proclaimed (1:3, 2:24.) In contrast the false teachers are seen by their lack of love (1:9-11, 3:11-18), their lack of obedience (1:6-8, 2:3-6, 3:7-10), and their denial of apostolic truth (2:18-24).

This focus is seen in chapter 4 in two big ways;

Firstly chapter 4 is full of teaching on love. Here we learn that God is love (4:8, 4:16) and that all love comes from God (4:7) and that the supreme demonstration of God's love was in giving Christ to die as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (4:9-10) and that God commands his people to respond to his love by loving one another with that same sort of love (4:11, 4:19-21.)

Secondly the theme of truth and the need for discernment runs through chapter 4. Notice how the chapter starts with this theme in 4:1-6 and then returns to the theme in 4:13-16.

Throughout this chapter John is teaching us about what genuine Christianity looks and sounds like.

#### **Applications**

There are two big areas of application in this chapter. In your study you may decide to focus on one or both of these.

1. The Need for Discernment - There are all sorts of 'christian' voices around today claiming to proclaim 'christian' messages. The New Testament repeatedly warns us about these people (see Matthew 7:15, Mark 13:22-23, Acts 20:28-30 and 2 John 7). Christians are not to naively accept everything they hear just because the speaker claims to be Christian. Instead we are to 'test the spirits to see whether they are from God.' (v1.) Christians are to be discerning. There is a form of judgmentalism that God approves of! In today's world where technology gives us access to all sorts of teachers and preachers we need to be learning how to discern what is true and false teaching.
2. The Need for Love - You might feel like we keep hearing this over and over again in 1 John... and you'd be right! Jesus said that our love for one another is what will mark us out as his people so we shouldn't be surprised that John returns to this theme time and time again in his letter. I found David Jackman both incredibly helpful and personally challenging on this so here is a length quote from him that is well worth reading;

*“Love for the unseen Lord is best expressed not just in words, but in deeds of love towards the Lord’s people whom we do see.*

*Is this not one of our greatest sins as Christians today? We may talk a lot about loving God, we may express it in our worship with great emotion, but what does it mean when we are so critical of other Christians, so ready to jump to negative conclusions about people, so slow to bear their burdens, so unwilling to step into their shoes? Such lovelessness totally contradicts what we profess and flagrantly disobeys God’s commands. It becomes a major stumbling-block to those who are seeking Christ and renders any attempts at evangelism useless. In many churches and fellowships we need a fresh repentance on this matter, a new humbling before God, an honest confession of our need and a cry to God for mercy and grace to change us.*

*Let us not avoid the plain teaching of Scripture. If we do not love those fellow Christians whom we know well and see regularly within our fellowship circles, we cannot be loving God. We may have occasional warm feelings, but these can be merely sentimental and unrelated to other people in their real-life situations. The proof of true love is not emotion or words, but deeds, which reach out to help others in need. But the other side of the coin is that such practical caring love can be a wonderful ground of assurance. There is a divine obligation laid upon us all in verse 21. The whole law is summed up in the royal law of love and we cannot love God without keeping his commandments. His will is that we should reflect the image of our Creator, who is love, by our love for one another.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Jackman, D., 1988. [\*The message of John’s letters: living in the love of God\*](#), Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

## Questions

**Starter Question - In the past the only way that Christians could receive Christian teaching was by going to church. What are some of the different ways that you can get Christian input?**

*Imagine what it would have been like to be a typical Christian in the 17th century. There's no TV, no radio, no internet. If you are able to read you might have access to one or two Christian books at most. Your main way of accessing Christian teaching was by reading your Bible and by going to church.*

*Fast-forward to today and we have an endless supply of Christian books, TV channels, radio shows, podcasts, blogs, websites, Facebook posts and online sermons. We have access to so many different sources of teaching. On the one hand this can be great (there's good stuff out there) but on the other hand it can be very dangerous (there's lots of bad stuff out there.)*

*We just want to start by getting people to recognise the many different sources that are now open to us.*

### The Need for Discernment

**1. According to v1-6 and v13-16 what are some of the marks of false teachers?**

*The aim here is to get people's heads into the passage. Notice what these people say about Jesus. You could also go back to chapter 2 or you could look up some of the cross references mentioned above to get a fuller picture. Just be careful that you don't take too long doing this.*

**2. Why do we need to be so discerning about who we listen to?**

*This might be obvious but it needs to be said - false teaching is dangerous. False teachers are trying to lead people astray (3:7). Notice too that when we start believing false teaching our relationship with God is damaged (4:15.) Who we listen to online really does matter!*

**3. How can we be more discerning when it comes to what we read, watch and listen to?**

*For some of us we need to start by recognising that everything that claims to be Christian isn't necessarily the real deal. We need to test the spirits. We need to examine what we hear and hold it up against the truth that the apostles have passed on to us in the Bible (4:14.) The better we know the truth, the better we'll be able to spot the lies.*

### The Need for Love

**4. What do we learn about God's love from v7-12?**

*This might be familiar but it's good to get us actually looking at the text. In particular we notice sacrificial nature of God's love (v9-10), the cost of his love (v9) and the fact that God loved us when we didn't love him (v10.) This is to be the pattern of our love for one another.*

**5. God loved us when we didn't love him (v10.) What will it look like for us to be a church marked by this sort of proactive love?**

*There will always be people in church who we don't naturally warm to. They might come from a different background or ethnicity to us. They might not be particularly nice, they might rub us up the wrong way. They might not have made a good first impression or they*

*might have said or done something that hurt us. God calls us to take the initiative and move towards them in love even if we're not sure that they will reciprocate that love.*

*This has implications too for newcomers and those outside the church. Will we take the initiative to welcome and reach out or will we just wait for people to come to us?*

**6. God loved us by sacrificing what was most precious to him (v9.) What sort of things are most precious to us?**

*There might be all sorts of things that are precious to us like our money, our time, our family, our relationships and our work.*

**1. What would it look like for us to sacrifice these things for the sake of our church family?**

*This is probably the hardest and most personal question of the study but also potentially the most valuable. Many of us live such busy lives that what little free time we do have is incredibly precious to us. Our instinct is to use that time to do something that we enjoy with people we enjoy being with. When someone uses what little time they have to serve others in the church, go to home group or the prayer meeting or help teach or lead a group that's sacrificial love.*

**7. In what ways are we tempted to water down this teaching about love?**

*God's definition of love is so much higher than ours. We'd much rather settle for a form of love that looks like everyone else's love because that will be less costly and inconvenient.*

**8. Looking at v7-12 and v16-21 why is our love for one another so important?**

*It's vital for the world looking on (v12) as Jesus said in John 13:34-35. It's also vital for us because as we see this sort of love in us it gives us a sense of assurance that we really are God's people (v17-18.)*