



REAL LOVE

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

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CONTENTS



About This Guide	4
Week 1. Behind the Tree	5
Week 2. The Face of Hypocrisy	7
Week 3. Parents in the Faith	9
Week 4. We Have an Anointing	11
Week 5. Putting into Practice	13
Week 6. Love One Another	15
Week 7. Made Real	17



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Real Love by Thaddeus Barnum serves as the text for this interactive study. With clarity and utmost practicality, *Real Love* helps us understand what it means to have a vital relationship with Jesus and others. This relationship includes exploring real love and finding real life for our souls. But it also challenges us to practice obedient faith, even when hard trials invade our lives.

Trust the Lord to enrich your life and the lives of your group members as you explore your real love in these sessions.



WEEK 1

BEHIND THE TREE

Matthew 5:21–23; 1 John 1:5–7

Genuine love is basic to good relationships.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Every good discussion leader loves the ministry of helping others to know God’s Word better in order to relate it to life’s challenges and opportunities. However, it is more important to love the recipients of that ministry. Paul acknowledged that without that love he would be nothing. Let love for God and others motivate you to do your best for Him and your group members each week.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

So many of life’s challenges are mysteries to us. How can we overcome temptation? How can we not only endure pain, but also triumph over it? How can we handle the death of a dear friend or loved one? How can we cope with the fact that we, too, will die someday? How can we share God’s love effectively—even with those who adamantly resist every mention of God? As Thaddeus Barnum points out on page 13 of *Real Love*, we gain the answers by coming as little children to Jesus and seeking His help.

Barnum reveals an especially difficult situation in which we need Jesus’ help. Broken relationships. When a good friend hurts us and ends the relationship, what do we do? Do we get angry? Give the offender a piece of our mind? Write off the friendship forever? Sink into deep self-pity? According to Matthew 5:21–22, anyone who harbors anger against “his brother” invites divine judgment. Indeed, fellowship with a Christian brother or sister depends upon our walking in the light. Are our hearts open to the light? Are we walking in the light?

After reflecting deeply on the role love plays in the believer's walk in the light and Christian fellowship, Thad Barnum opened his heart and life to God's inspection and determined to mend a broken relationship by applying genuine love (see *Real Love*, pp. 23–24). His decision led to a restored relationship.

As Barnum explains on page 38, fellowship with God “is forever bound to the fellowship we have together in Jesus Christ.” So when we offend someone, we must not simply say we are sorry but still feel we are right. We must yield to the Lord's conviction and own our part in the offense. The fact that Jesus entered our world and showed us how highly He regarded relationships (1 John 1:1–2) does not allow us to devalue relations. Instead, we must assign a high priority to them.

Because there is no darkness with God, we must step out of the darkness of our sins, including our broken relationships, and not blame others. Rather, we ought to expose our hearts to God's light. In turn He will restore our Christian fellowship and cleanse us from all sin (1 John 1:5–7).

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following questions to lead group discussion.

1. What do you think it means to come humbly to Jesus?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that sinful pride contributes to broken relationships?
3. Without mentioning names, can you describe a broken relationship you observed? What do you think caused it?
4. Without mentioning names, can you describe a restored relationship? What do you think helped to restore that relationship?
5. Read 1 John 1:1–2. What broken relationship did Jesus come to earth to restore? How did His love factor into that restoration?
6. How are light and love inseparable in genuine Christian fellowship?
7. In his book *Real Love*, Thaddeus Barnum advocates coming out from behind the tree. What do you think it means to come out from behind the tree?
8. How would you counsel a victim of child abuse who wants to reconcile with the abusive parent?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that it is possible to forgive but impossible to forget?
10. Read Matthew 5:21–24. Why do you agree or disagree that sustaining a broken relationship invalidates one's worship?
11. What evidence of placing blame have you seen in the culture? In family relationships? In a church? What might happen in each of these contexts if the blame-placing stopped?

WRAP-UP



Close this week's session by challenging each member to show love to whoever has offended him or her and to help others restore broken relationships.



WEEK 2

THE FACE OF HYPOCRISY

1 John 1:8—2:10

Real love demands real honesty.

TO THE FACILITATOR

John 10:3 informs us that the Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name as He leads them. Show that you love your group participants by calling them by name as you lead them into a closer relationship with the Lord and one another. “You back there in the second to the last row” fails to communicate a shepherd’s love, but “Yes, John, I see you want to say something” communicates real love.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

Confession is basic to God’s remedy for a broken relationship with Him. But confession involves more than simply saying, “I’m sorry.” When we truly confess our sins, we abandon hypocrisy, admit that we have disobeyed God, take the same attitude God takes about sin, and determine by the help of the Holy Spirit to forsake our sins. There is good news: If we truly confess our sins, God forgives our sins. He wipes the slate clean. He lovingly restores us to fellowship with Him (1 John 1:8–10).

On page 70 of *Real Love*, the author offers wise counsel and a challenge about confessing our sins: “Every time we minimize the sin within us, we minimize our need for a savior and what he did to pay for it on the cross. How are you deceiving yourself today? If you think you are not, are you sure? Do you see yourself in 1 John 1:8 and 10? Be real, honest, and true. What prevents you from running to verse 9 with all your heart and soul?”

Occasionally, a believer sins, but the risen Savior acts as his or her defense attorney in heaven. He paid the penalty of our sins, so that we might be forgiven (1 John 2:1–2), but His death on our behalf does not excuse our sinning. Sin is serious. We dare not claim to be walking in fellowship

with God while sinning against Him. Such a claim is hypocritical (v. 4). Real love for God expresses itself in obedience to His Word (v. 5). Whoever truly loves God walks as Jesus walked.

The command to love one's brother and sister was not new to John's readers. They had heard it from the beginning of their Christian experience. Indeed, Jesus had commanded His followers to love one another (John 13:34). Nevertheless, the command was "new" in the sense that it is always fresh and always current. We never outgrow the need to love one another.

Real love is the criterion by which a person may judge whether he or she lives in darkness or in light (1 John 2:8–10). Hatred is an impediment that causes a person to stumble. But a person who loves his or her brother or sister lives in the light and walks through life without stumbling (v. 10).

In *Real Love* (p. 106), Thaddeus Barnum poses probing questions that apply what John wrote. Barnum writes: "With our tongues, we speak against people for whom our Lord died. Why do we do this so freely? How can you—and how can you help others—do what's right in the Lord's sight? John's passion is to take what we believe and make it real in our lives. His imagery contrasts light and dark. What do you need from the Lord to help you break from patterns that belong to the dark?"

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following questions to lead group discussion.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that most Christians are guilty of hypocrisy?
2. How seriously do you think most Christians take the admonition to confess their sins?
3. Read pages 90–91 of *Real Love*. What do you think Barnum means by "Late at night is no fun" (p. 90)? How well do you relate to author's experiences?
4. What might happen if Christian hypocrites abandoned their hypocrisy?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that it is difficult to "walk the talk"?
6. Do you think it is possible to walk with one foot in light and the other in darkness? Why or why not?
7. What role does the Holy Spirit play in enabling believers to love one another?
8. Thaddeus Barnum affirms on page 94 of *Real Love* that every time we face a broken relationship, we face a choice. What do you think the choice is when we face a broken relationship?
9. What trouble might arise when a believer hates his or her brother or sister? What trouble might arise when believers in a congregation hate one another?
10. How well do you think Christians are demonstrating love and light to the world?

WRAP-UP



Conclude this session by asking group members to pray silently, confessing whatever they have done to hurt others. Have each person voluntarily shake hands with or hug another person, and say, "(Person's Name), Jesus loves you, and I do too."



WEEK 3

PARENTS IN THE FAITH

1 John 2:12–19

The church experiences real love as a family.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Arriving on time, even before your first group members arrive, tells everyone you are glad to be the facilitator and you are excited about this study through *Real Love*. Arrange your schedule to allow you to arrive on time.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

On page 120 of *Real Love*, Thaddeus Barnum wisely observes that “the family imagery of the church in the Bible is meant for our good; for our encouragement, discipline, and growth in Christ. We find an example of that family imagery in 1 John 2:12–19, in which the aging apostle John opened his heart to commend and counsel members of God’s family.

Likely, John used the term “children” in 2:12 to identify all his readers. They were dear to him. After all, God had forgiven their sins for the sake of His Son Jesus. However, John may have been addressing recently born-again Christians.

He commended “fathers” (vv. 13–14) because they had personal knowledge of the eternal Lord.

Young men received John’s commendation because they had experienced victory over Satan (v. 13), were spiritually strong, and devoted to the Word of God (v. 14).

Members of God’s family truly know the meaning of real love when they display the characteristics John commended in these verses.

But temptation knocks at the heart’s door often and relentlessly, so John warned his readers to refrain from loving the world, the evil spirit of the age that Satan promotes and uses to hold

unbelievers captive (v. 15). He made it clear that love for the evil world system excludes love for God. Evil cravings, the lust of the eyes, and sinful pride are sourced in the world, which is passing away (vv. 16–17).

Instead of grasping for what a sinful, condemned world offers, believers ought to do God's will. Living for God has eternity in view!

Fatherly John counseled the family members to do the will of God and to recognize antichrists. He told his readers they were living in “the last hour,” when antichrists would arise (v. 18). He identified the antichrists as having been previously associated with believers. The fact that they left the assembly of believers proved they had never been a part of God's family (v. 19).

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following questions to lead group discussion.

1. Why are you glad to be a part of the family of God?
2. How might you and your fellow believers build a stronger sense of family in your church?
3. Barnum claims in *Real Love* (p. 119) that structure and order are what it means to be part of the family of God? Why do you agree or disagree with this claim?
4. The author also claims on page 118 that knowing respect and honor are also what it means to be part of the family of God? Why do you agree or disagree with this claim?
5. How would you counsel young Christian adults to “overcome the Evil One”?
6. If someone asked you how to become a member of God's family, what would you say?
7. How would you define worldliness?
8. What influences do you think the Devil uses most effectively to try to draw believers into worldliness? Explain.
9. Why do you agree or disagree that God has a plan for every believer's life?

WRAP-UP



Distribute slips of paper and pencils to the group members, and ask each of them to write down anonymously one worldly desire or habit he or she will abandon with the help of the Holy Spirit. Have the members toss their answers into a wastebasket to symbolize the end to the worldly desire or habit.



WEEK 4

WE HAVE AN ANOINTING

1 John 2:20–21; 2:23–3:3

A heart relationship with Jesus Christ is essential.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Is it possible that someone, perhaps several, in your group have never been born again? This week's session emphasizes the importance of knowing Jesus personally and therefore provides an excellent opportunity for you to present the gospel. Why not let concerned group members know you are available to introduce them to the Savior?

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

On page 172 of *Real Love*, we read: "When we come to know the Lord, a transaction happens. By His doing, His anointing abides in us so we know Him." This strong assertion captures what the apostle John wrote in 1 John 2:20–21; 2:23–3:3. In this passage, we learn that the Holy Spirit assures us of our relationship with God as His dear children. We know the truth about Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Antichrists do not subscribe to the truth, and demonstrate by their denial that they do not belong to the Father (2:21–23).

If we reject the antichrists' false teaching and adhere to the truth we embraced upon hearing the gospel, we will abide in fellowship with the Son and the Father. We have the promise of eternal life, but false teachers try to lead us astray (vv. 25–26). We do not need the false teachers' message, because the Holy Spirit in us teaches us what is real and true. Therefore, we ought to abide in Christ (v. 27).

Someday Jesus will appear, and when He appears, we want to be confident and unashamed before Him (v. 28). We have good reason, therefore, to abide in Him and lead a righteous life. A righteous living is evidence of the new birth (v. 29).

God's love defies description. By calling us His children, He lavished that inexpressible love upon us, but we are a riddle to the world. It does not recognize us as God's beloved children just as it failed to recognize who Jesus was (see 1 John 3:1). Nevertheless, we are God's children, and our future is amazingly bright. When Jesus appears, we will see Him as He is (v. 2).

The prospect of Jesus' appearance gives us hope, but it also motivates us to purify our lives "just as He is pure" (v. 3).

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following questions to lead group discussion.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that it is possible to know God?
2. How does the Holy Spirit help the believer to abide in Christ?
3. What false teaching about Jesus have you encountered recently?
4. How would you respond if someone told you Jesus is not the Son of God?
5. What do you believe are the three best things about being a child of God?
6. Why do you agree or disagree that a Christian can be popular with the world?
7. How can a believer appear confident and unashamed before Jesus?
8. Why are you looking forward to Jesus' return?
9. What differences should the hope of Jesus' return make in a believer's daily life?

WRAP-UP



Have volunteers in the group complete this sentence: "Because I have an anointing . . ."



WEEK 5

PUTTING INTO PRACTICE

1 John 3:4–15, 17–24

Real love for God flows through believers to others.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Creating a casual atmosphere for group interaction is beneficial and not difficult. Take a few minutes at the beginning of the session to let participants volunteer highlights of the past week. This investment of time will help everyone relax and get better acquainted with one another. Group members will feel free to speak up in the session in this relaxed, casual environment.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

It has been said that some people are so heavenly minded they are no earthly good. Real love for God doesn't work like that. It flows to others through deeds of kindness.

Self-centeredness lies at the core of sin, but Jesus died to set us free from sin. Now that He has set us free, we live righteously (1 John 3:4–7). Living in sin is proof that the perpetrator belongs to the Devil (v. 8). However, Jesus came to destroy the Devil's work and empower us to live righteously (v. 9). How people live says everything about their spiritual status. They are either children of God or children of the Devil (v. 10). Anyone who does not love their brother or sister is not a child of God. Furthermore, they are as guilty of murder as Cain was, because hatred in God's eyes is tantamount to murder (vv. 11–13, 15). As Thaddeus Barnum points out on page 243 of *Real Love*, it's possible to stab our brothers and sisters with our words and hate them with our souls. Believers, on the other hand, know they possess eternal life because they love their brothers and sisters (v. 14).

We fail to practice real love if we clutch our material possessions selfishly and withhold them from a needy brother or sister (v. 17). Words can be empty, but charitable actions are full of love (v. 18). Furthermore, love expressed in actions gives us confidence that we belong to the truth and have peace with God (v. 19). Of course it is possible that a Christian may feel that he or she is not performing charitable deeds adequately. In that case, he or she should be assured that God knows his or her motivation and performance (vv. 20–21).

Obedience to God’s commands is another evidence that we belong to Him, and our obedience provides a clear channel for answered prayer (vv. 22–23).

In the final analysis, God’s Spirit testifies to our vibrant, living relationship with God (v. 24).

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following questions to lead group discussion.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that it is easy to love the people we like but hard to love those we dislike?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that government welfare programs exempt churches from assisting the poor?
3. Have you received an act of loving kindness from a fellow believer? If so, how did it make you feel?
4. How might a church help its members put real love into practice more often?
5. Read Luke 10:25–37. How does the story of the good Samaritan expose hypocritical religion? How does it show real love in action? What practical principles do you derive from this story?
6. Read the opening paragraphs on page 231 of *Real Love*. Why is it wrong to look down on anyone? Do you think the author was too hard on himself? Why or why not?
7. Why do you agree or disagree that God is more likely to answer the prayers of someone who puts love into action than those of someone who simply says he or she loves others?
8. How can a church engage in programs that help the needy without substituting a social gospel for evangelism?

WRAP-UP



Encourage group members to put Christian love into action this week by performing at least three kind deeds.



WEEK 6

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

1 John 4:4–15, 17–21

Real love puts others first.

TO THE FACILITATOR

If possible, arrange chairs in a circle or semi-circle so the group members can see and hear one another. Rows of chairs mandate that voices project mainly forward, which makes it difficult for people to hear those who are seated in front of them. The semi-circle or circle allows for face-to-face interaction, which is basic to successful group discussion.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Orthodoxy suggests proper adherence to sound doctrine. Orthopraxy suggests proper application of sound doctrine in daily life. In 1 John 4:4–6, John commended his readers for their orthodoxy, but followed with a discussion of orthopraxy in the rest of the chapter.

We ought to love one another (v. 7), because love originates with our Father in heaven who loved us so much that He gave His Son for us. Jesus died to bring us eternal life (vv. 9–10). Such love was totally undeserved. We were sinners deserving only God's wrath (John 3:36; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:4). This is the kind of love we should show to others (1 John 2:11), and in doing so we make God's love visible.

No one has seen God, but the Spirit assures us that we know Him and His Son, our Savior (vv. 12–14). Further, every believer possesses real love—God-given love. And this gift of divine love assures us that God lives in us (vv. 15).

A believer who loves God and his fellow believers has no reason to fear the judgment seat of Christ (vv. 17–18; see also 2 Cor. 5:9–10). However, a believer experiences fear and fails to experience the full measure of love if he or she withholds love from God and others.

Believers love God and others because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). There is nothing to fear about facing God, our Judge, if we know He loves us and we love Him. But those who hate their brothers and sisters are liars, hypocrites. How can they love God, whom they haven't seen, if they do not love their brothers and sisters whom they have seen (v. 20)? Our duty is clear. We must love both God and our brother and sister (v. 21).

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following questions to lead group discussion.

1. How would you answer the question a woman asked Thaddeus Barnum: “Are you a Christian if you sin?” (*Real Love*, p. 236)?
2. Read pages 299–300 of *Real Love*. How is it possible that ministry can come before people?
3. Why do you agree or disagree that right believing and right living are closely related? Do you think a person can lead a righteous life if he or she does not believe right? Why or why not?
4. How does God's love enter our lives?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that we receive more of God's love as we advance in holiness?
6. Why is liking fellow believers not the same as loving them?
7. How can a believer confidently anticipate the judgment seat of Christ?
8. What do you find so amazing about the fact that God gave His Son for you?
9. How have you witnessed Christian love in action?

WRAP-UP



Ask the group to identify a need they can lovingly and collectively meet.



WEEK 7

MADE REAL

1 John 5:1–20

TO THE FACILITATOR

Because this is the final session of *Real Love*, thank the group participants for their attendance and participation in the sessions. Take a few minutes to let them share what they thought was especially helpful.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

First John 5:1–5 reminds us that by faith in Jesus Christ we are born of God and therefore love God as our heavenly Father. Further, we also love God's children, obey His commands, and overcome the world.

God has given clear testimony about His Son. Undeniable evidence assures us He was baptized by John the Baptist, identified as God's Son by the Spirit, and crucified for our sins (vv. 6–9). God gives eternal life to all who believe in the Son of God, and indeed the believer has this testimony in his or her heart (v. 10). However, whoever does not believe the testimony about Jesus Christ does not have eternal life (vv. 11–12).

Heaven need not be a hope-so experience. John wrote to provide believers with a know-so experience (v. 13). As God's children, we have confidence that He will answer every prayer that agrees with His will (vv. 14–15). Such confidence prompts us to pray for a fellow believer whose sin does not lead to death, but we are not specifically forbidden to pray for a believer whose sin leads to death (vv. 16–17).

Likely John was referring to willful, continuing sin that brings divine discipline in the form of physical death. (See, for example, Acts 5:1–10; 1 Cor. 11:29–32.)

After writing about “a sin leading to death” (1 John 5:16), John assured his readers that it is an exception rather than the rule. A child of God may fall into sin, stubbornly continue in it, and face discipline, but normally a believer does not continue to sin (v. 18). The Devil cannot control the believer’s life; he can control only the life of the unbeliever (v. 19). We believers are in Christ. We know God is true and the source of eternal life (v. 20).

John closed his epistle with a closing command: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (v. 21). No one or anything deserves the honor, worship, and allegiance that we owe our Savior.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Use the following questions to lead group discussion.

1. Recalling part 7 of *Real Love*, which real-life story about a believer’s firm assurance of eternal life did you find most inspiring? What was so inspiring about that story?
2. Why is it important that Jesus was a real human being as well as truly the Son of God?
3. How have you overcome the world this past week?
4. How should a church deal with a staff member who has committed adultery?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that a pastor who has been restored after committing adultery should be allowed to continue as a pastor?
6. Why do you agree or disagree that no one can be a child of God without believing in Jesus as Savior?
7. Is it possible for a believer to know absolutely that he or she has eternal life? Defend your answer.
8. How would you respond to a Christian who asked you why you are sure God answers prayer?
9. Read Galatians 6:1. What action should a church take if someone is caught in a sin? Why is it essential to maintain a humble attitude when restoring that person?
10. Why do you agree or disagree that a person’s lifestyle is a good indicator that he or she is a child of God?
11. What idols do you think try to lure believers from their wholehearted worship of the true God?

WRAP-UP

Conclude this session with a brief time of prayer in which volunteers pray aloud for opportunities to demonstrate real love to God and others.

If your group benefited from studying *Real Identity* together, watch for the release of Thaddeus Barnum’s next book, *Real Mercy*, a sixty-day devotional in the life of Jesus, available August 2015.