



Growing up in Grace

1 John 2:12-14

A few weeks ago, we began the book of 1 John, and if you have been with us, or are familiar with this letter at all, you realize that the passage just read is very different from anything so far. In fact, in the NIV, it is typeset in a poem-type fashion.

John has been stating the tests by which they (we) may know that they have new, spiritual life within them, and therefore are God's, and conversely he has spoken of those in whom it is not present. John opened his little letter and got right into the main concerns and issues. False teachers had come into the church and he is giving tests to sort out the true from the false.

At times his words have been harsh. He has said that those who profess to know God but who fail to obey God's commandments are liars. He has added that those who say they love God but fail to love their brothers are in the dark, walk in the dark, and do not know where they are going.

But today's section is entirely different. John steps back, so to speak, and says to himself, "I don't want these dear Christians to get the wrong idea. I know that most of them are on track spiritually. They are growing. I need to encourage them."

Most persons have had the experience of making a remark that was intended for one individual and of having an entirely different individual take it personally. It may even have been that the one who applied the remark to himself was the one who least needed it.

This was in John's mind as he writes vv. 12-14. He had just said something intended for certain individuals, and he was afraid that the Christians, for whom he had not intended it, might take it wrongly.

In fact, you could compare this letter (1 John) to a letter that a mother writes to her daughter who has gone away to college. The mother gets word that there has been an unusual outbreak of mononucleosis on the campus with 100 cases confirmed. Her daughter is not among the sick -- at least not yet. The mother knows that, but goes to the card shop and gets a card that has a little rhyme on the front cover that says,

*I ask not that God give you wealth,
But daily beg him for your health.*

Then she writes on the back of the card,
Dear Katelyn,

Don't misunderstand. I didn't send this card because I think you are among the victims of the mono outbreak. Actually, I am so happy that you are well!

Of course, I don't want you to get sick. Take the necessary precautions. But I write because my heart is full of memories and confidence. Do you remember how you once had measles -- and how you got completely well!

So I'm glad you are well. Hold on to what you've got. Eat right, get your sleep. And take good care of yourself.

Love, Mom

Why did this mother buy this card and write this note? The card said, "*I beg God daily for your health.*" Then she wrote, "*I don't want you to get sick. Take the necessary precautions...Hold on to what you've got...Eat right. Take good care of yourself.*" So it's clear that at least part of her reason for writing is to help the daughter stay healthy.

But on the other hand, she said, "*I am not writing you out of distress...I'm so glad that you are well.*" She spends time delighting with her daughter, in how well she is and how she has been able to conquer sickness before.

It seems to me that the letter of 1 John is like this pattern. He is encouraging the believers, *in their varying stages of spiritual maturity*, because they have not fallen for lies, but he is also encouraging them not to, by pointing out the dangers. Sounds like a parent to me??? And so he is, as he writes to encourage his children, fathers and youth.

When John uses family words, he is talking not about age, not about gender, but about **stages of maturity in the Christian life**. He's not referring to physical age, but age of spiritual maturity.

In every congregation, there are people in various stages of spiritual maturity. There are those -they may be 50 or 60 years old, but they have only recently entered into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. They are "children". Others have grown and like children move from vulnerability to strength and vigor, able to withstand spiritual attack and stand strong - these are the "young men." And then there are the "Fathers" - those who in their maturity come to a even deeper knowledge of God.

Today, we will see these and how John describes them. As we do, remember something. When we grow from one to another (from a little child to a youth), it's just like in life, we *ADD* one to another. There's a sense that I still feel like a child and a youth, but now I'm older. There's still a kid in me....you never loose the others, you just grow up into a deeper experience.

I. CHILDREN

Let's look at these three stages. What word of encouragement does Grandfather John want to give to "children" - a newcomer to the faith, one who has just stepped into the glorious freedom of knowing Christ? And if you are not a child of God yet, you are contemplating all this - listen carefully.

Two things: First, at the end of verse 12, you will rejoice because "*Your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.*" How often do we return to the very first thing-that we're forgiven? Because what can be greater than that!?! "*Our sins have been forgiven, on account of his name.*" Whose name? Jesus'. We're forgiven not because we deserve to be forgiven, we're not forgiven because we're doing better, but *on account of his name*.

We have an awesome Savior, who has paid the price for our sins. In his name we are forgiven for what we did yesterday, for what we did this morning. There is no end to this remarkable experience of forgiveness, the truth that begins our life in Christ.

The **second thing** he says of new believers (children) in the v. 13 is, "*I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father.*" When you put your faith in Jesus Christ and enter God's family, the **IDENTITY ISSUE** is solved. When you become a Christian, you know in whose family you are. You know what your name is because you know your Father's name.

However dysfunctional and chaotic our pre-Christian world was, the fatherhood of God becomes a source of security for us. Our new identity can't be taken away.

Two great truths-we are forgiven and we are accepted and adopted into God family -are the great foundation on which babies in Christ can start living life.

II. FATHERS

What distinguishes fathers - the spiritually mature? Interestingly, John makes no changes at all between his first and second addresses to fathers. Each time he changes the focus in what he says about children and what he says about youths. But he says twice, "*I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning.*"

In chapter 1 verse 1, " that which was from the beginning" refers to the person of Christ. John is saying that **maturity is a relationship with God in all his infinite, amazing beauty**. It is a relationship that is deep and fulfilling and challenging and new every morning and satisfying enough that we become freer and freer to think of Him, not ourselves.

The point in John's poem -- what is characteristic of fathers is that they have become able to think about someone other than themselves. They are overtaken by their sense of the Eternal One, the One who is from the beginning.

There is a great verse from Psalms 27:4:

"One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in his temple."

In writing that psalm, David reduced life to one thing that deserved all his attention: to dwell in the presence of God, to gaze on his beauty, with all the emotional satisfaction that goes with that; and to

meditate on or to seek to know his thoughts, with all the intellectual satisfaction that goes with that.

It is *not just* the freedom from sin that comes from Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, or our new identity with God that we appreciate, nor. *It never stops being that of course.* **But more and more are we captivated by the Lord's personality, his heart, his creativity, by the beauty and joy that make up who he is.**

[All of the things that apply to the first two stages apply to them as well. It's just that they don't have to invest as much self-focus and have greater God-focus in their life.]

You have probably seen that principle at work in many other experiences of life.

- When you first engage a problem, it demands a great deal of your attention, and you're very aware of yourself working on it.
- The first time you drove on the highway, it was scary, right? There was so much to focus on; you were looking in mirrors and watching the speedometer and paying attention to all the cars around you. It took a lot of effort, and you were very aware of yourself doing it. An experienced freeway driver has to focus on all the same things and make just as many judgments, but the process requires less self awareness.
- The other day some friends were telling me about an anticipated audit by the IRS. They were nervous, having never been through the experience before. Shortly after that I talked to someone who had been audited many times, and to them it was an inconvenience but no big deal. IRS audits are something you can get through. It's a hassle, but nothing more.]

III. YOUTHS-DEFEATING THE EVIL ONE

The third group John addresses is youths. This is that long stage of action and movement. Why does John put it out of order - I don't know for sure, but I suspect it's because this flows into the next section of his letter. This book is about staying strong, defeating the spiritual enemies of our lives.

In the first stanza he says, *"I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one."* In the second stanza, the end of verse 14, he says, *"I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one."*

Jesus said of the *evil one*, or the devil, *"He was a murderer from the beginning...he is a liar and the father of lies"* (John 8:44). Death and deception are

the trademarks of the evil one. And John sees in the youths before him, in those who are in the growing stage of their faith, who are expanding in their knowledge of God and taking a stand for Jesus' sake, the defeat of the devil.

What a marvelous thing to say! There is no "maybe" in his words. He doesn't say, *"Well, you might turn out okay - one in ten do. You've got a chance."* NO, we already have the victory in Christ. And anyone who appropriates the gifts of God and grows in the Word of God, will grow stronger and will be able to overcome the tempter's snares!

The second stanza (v. 14b) says, *"...You are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one."*

And the word of God lives in you. The **weapon** with which we battle the evil one is the **WOG, the truth**, to have it live in us, to believe it, to speak it. It is the truth of Scripture, not just warm Christian sentiment or religious platitudes, that is our source of strength.

In this church, the majority of us are probably spiritual youths.

There are a good many new Christians among us, those who are savoring their identity with God as their Father and the fact that their sins are forgiven.

There are, thank God, grownups among us, too. This church is very privileged to have a good percentage of fathers.

But most of us are in the middle, still aware of ourselves in the battle; still making both good and bad choices. So John says, "You are strong," (whether we feel like we are or not).

- We have strength we know nothing of;
- power we know nothing of;
- support we know nothing of, armies behind us that we cannot see.

We're strong in the face of the evil one.

John knows that his letter is tough.