

When I served as a chaplain many years ago, I often went to visit a man named John. John was in his 80's and he had to have both of his legs amputated at the knees. He was a fellow chaplain, and after his amputations, I would visit John at his home practically every week for almost a year.

It was a very difficult season for John as you can imagine, but during this time, John went from being stuck in his bed, to finding a way to sit up without using his legs as a counter-balance, then discovering a way to slide out of his bed to a wheel chair, and eventually becoming hell on wheels in his motorized scooter. I would often go by his house and find him working on his car in the garage, or doing some odd job around the house to help his wife.

Although it was hard, John seemed to be making the necessary adjustments, but still, there were those moments when he would go through these emotional cycles where he became very depressed and discouraged – thinking he couldn't do anything and there was no point in continuing on, and it was in those moments that I would give John a pep talk – reminding him of what he had accomplished and just how far he had really come.

I think in the passage we are looking at this morning, the Apostle John might be doing the same thing with some believers in the church who may have got caught up in the false teaching of the Gnostics – and now seeing the error in their ways – they need a pep talk, they need some encouragement to remind them of just how far they had come.

Last week, I left you with some questions about growing: **do you have a growing desire to obey God's word, and is your love for God's people growing?** These were questions prompted by some very direct words from the Apostle John.

If you recall, John was confronting some false teaching by the Gnostics that had crept into the early church, and this false teaching caused a lot of confusion and a lot of doubt, so much so, that it left some in the church very troubled about their relationship with the Lord – apparently leading some to ask, **“How can someone really know they really know God?”**

There were those in the church who were seeking assurance, and so John shared that the evidence we have come to really know God is a life of obedience – not a perfect obedience, not a flawless obedience, but a determined obedience where the desire of one's heart is intent on responding to God's word in the right way.

How we live our lives in obedience to God reveals if we really know and really love God. That was one piece of the evidence given by John, and another piece

was a love for God's people. We are commanded to love one another – not just as we love ourselves, but in the way that Jesus loved us. Jesus said in **John 13**, beginning with **verse 34**,

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

The evidence that we really know God is a life characterized by obedience to God and a love for God's people.

John was pretty straight-forward in what he said about this – making a clear distinction between those who were walking in the light and those who were groping in the darkness, and surely what he said caused those in the church to take a long hard look in the mirror, but on the heels of all of that, John apparently sensed the need to follow up with some encouraging words about their victories in the faith and the progress they had made in their spiritual growth.

So, with that in mind, if you have your Bible, turn to **1 John 2**, and we will continue on beginning with **verse 12**, where John writes.

¹² I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. ¹³ I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. ¹⁴ I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

I will admit that after reading this passage several times, it was still somewhat of a head-scratcher for me. I had a difficult time understanding it – not necessarily because of its content, but because of its structure and its style – because of the way it's laid out. For me, this passage seems a little disconnected, almost as if it was just plopped into this chapter – it doesn't flow for me, and I am a flow guy, so I was getting worried that you folks might be getting a “longhorn sermon” from me this morning. **Do you know what a “longhorn sermon” is?** It's a sermon with two points and a lot of bull in the middle.

Now let me say, I think I was able to work through my difficulties and questions, but I do need to explain them as you might be scratching your heads as well.

If you notice these verses are very repetitive – almost word for word in some cases, which prompts the question – **why?** In only three verses, **why are they so repetitive?**

Biblical scholars offer various ideas for this, but the best idea for the repetition is for the purpose of emphasis. John wants these words to really stand out – he doesn't want his readers to miss anything.

When we write something and want to put an emphasis on a certain thoughts or ideas, we might put our words in all caps, we might underline the words, we might use a bold font or a larger font, or we might highlight them in some way. There could be any number of things we could do for the sake of emphasis, but in the first century, the way to emphasize words so that they stand out to the readers was through the use of repetition. So, that's what I think John is doing here – he wants to ensure that his readers don't miss this and he is using repetition for that purpose.

Then we come to these three groups identified as **little children, young men, and fathers.** **Do we take this literally, meaning is John being gender specific and excluding young women and mothers?** It is true, that in those days, John lived in a male dominated society, and I also know there are places in the Bible where there is a deliberate distinction between males and females, but I don't think that is the case here. I don't think that John has a specific gender in mind – instead it seems that this was a practice of the day where people “in general” were referred to in a masculine way. For example, if I said, “*Hey, you guys come over here,*” I'm not just speaking to the men – as in the *guys*, but I'm speaking to all of you. Hopefully, that makes sense. So, I don't think gender is in view here.

Now, since we are on the subject of these three groups, **what do they represent?** There are several approaches to explain these groups but the one that seems most popular is that they represent three levels of spiritual growth. In other words, **little children** would represent the new believers at the lowest level of maturity, **young men** are the believers who are growing in their faith, and then the **fathers** are the mature believers.

At first glance, that makes a lot of sense to me, and that's how many preachers and teachers present this passage as three stages of spiritual growth, but with that said, when we look at this letter in its entirety, we see that John refers to all believers in the church as his **little children**. He does this on multiple occasions, in fact, that's how John began this chapter – “*My little children.*”

So, going against the grain a bit, and I could be wrong here – I think John's use of the phrase “**little children**” actually refers to all true believers in the church, and

the reference to **young men** and **fathers** represent the levels of spiritual growth in the church – from A to Z, from young to old, from new to mature.

Now there are some people who could spend all day trying to figure this out – and God bless them, but for me – maybe *who* John is addressing is not as important as to *what* he has to say to them and to us, and ultimately as we will see, what John has to say is for the entire church.

So, let's see what he has to say, and to do this, I think it might be best to tackle each group one at a time. To the little children, John says in **verse 12**,

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake.

Your sins have been forgiven – and clearly, that truth applies to all genuine believers in the church, **doesn't it?**

I typically do not get deep into word structure; however, in this case it's important. That word "**forgiven**" is presented by John in a *passive-perfect* tense, and I like how Mark Bradley explains it. If you don't know, Mark is a professor at Gateway Seminary in Vancouver. He's a really smart guy, and this is what he says,

It's passive – meaning it's something done *to* you or *for* you. It's not something that you can do for yourself. John is not saying, "*I am writing to you dear children because you have accomplished something for the forgiveness of your sins.*" He's not saying that and nor can we. Instead, "*I am writing to you dear children because your sins have been forgiven – something has been done for you.*"

God has done the forgiving and we are the passive recipients of that forgiveness. It's a *passive* tense, but it's also in *perfect* tense, meaning it's an action that happened in the past and it's still just as true right up to the present. God has forgiven us in the past – He didn't forget about it, and we are still forgiven.

Then John modifies the phrase by adding "**for His name's sake**," explaining why and how their sins have been forgiven. Their sins are forgiven because of Jesus – the name that is above every name – the only name given under heaven by which we must be saved. They are forgiven "for His name's sake," purely by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. This is the permanent condition in which they stand.

Maybe the believers who got pulled into the false teaching of the Gnostics and blew it, needed to hear this simple truth again. They needed to hear **your sins have been forgiven** – and it's something we often need to hear as well. We are forgiven because Jesus paid it all.

The story is told of a time, many years ago, when a father and his daughter were walking through the grass on the Canadian prairie. In the distance they saw a prairie fire, which would soon engulf them. The father knew there was only one way of escape: they must quickly build a fire right where they were and burn a large patch of grass. When the huge prairie fire drew near, they could stand on the section that had already burned. When the flames approached them, the girl was terrified, but her father assured her, “The flames can’t get to us. We are standing where the fire has already been.”

So, it is with the forgiven when they see the judgment of God approaching. They are where the flames have already been, and therefore, they are safe.

In **verse 13c**, John continues and says, **I have written to you, children, because you know the Father.**

This is so important, and John is reminding them, and us as well, that the Lord God Almighty, the One who spoke the universe into existence is our **Father**. He’s our heavenly Father, He’s high and lifted up, and He chose to have a loving relationship with us, adopting us as His own children. As believers, we are His beloved children – no longer distant – no longer separated from Him.

Tim Keller says, *“The only person who dares wake up a king at 3:00 a.m. for a glass of water is a child. We have that kind of access.”*

We have a loving heavenly Father, revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. He cares for us, He has forgiven us, He knows us, and He wants us to know Him. This is the gospel truth, for all to hear, no matter your maturity level.

Then John comes to the **fathers** and he says in the first line of **verse 13**,

^{13a} I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning.

Then in the beginning of the next verse, John says,

^{14a} I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning.

So, John moves to those men and women who represent the mature believers. These are the ones who have walked with the Lord for many years – they have grown over time like oak trees with deep spiritual roots, and in both verses, he says to them they **know Him who was been from the beginning**. In other words, they are mature because they know God, in fact, knowing God is top priority for them.

I think the Apostle Paul explained it best in **Philippians 3**, beginning with **verse 7** when he said,

⁷ But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.

Like Paul – for these mature believers, Jesus had become more nearer and dearer to them over the years, so much so, that the world had lost its luster and Jesus had become their everything. Of course, they had family and friends, and yes, they had their jobs and their careers – and sure, they strived to be successful and making a living was important, and like Paul many were highly educated and trained – and none of these things are bad, but for these mature believers – at the very center of their lives was their relationship with Jesus Christ, and compared to Him – everything else seemed like rubbish. They wanted to know Him and they wanted to experience Him in a personal way.

Let me ask you a question. **When you stand before the Lord, what will you have to show for your life? Will it be your property, your possessions, your titles and your status, your awards and your recognition, will it be your influence and your power over others?** If it's these things – then you don't have much to show. The only thing that matters in life is knowing Jesus Christ, and anything that keeps you from Him is rubbish, no matter how good it seems to you.

Lastly, John addresses the **young men** in this passage, referring to those who are younger in the faith, and he says to them in **verse 13**, the second line,

^{13b} I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.

Then, in **verse 14**, the last line, he says to them,

^{14b} I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

In both of these verses, John describes this group as those who have **overcome the evil one** and quite frankly, this could apply to anyone in the church no matter their maturity level.

They have overcome the evil one – **and why?** Because **the word of God abides** in them, or said in another way: all growing Christians, all strong Christians are Bible Christians, and that's why, when Satan attacks, his goal is to keep you away from your Bible, to divert your attention away from it, and to cause you to question the

truth found in it. For those in Christ, Satan cannot stop you from being a Christian, but he can keep you from becoming a strong Christian and from experiencing the overcoming victory already won in Jesus Christ.

In our passage last week, the Apostle John dished out some strong words. He said to the church that those who say they have come to know the Lord, but do not obey Him, is a liar. Then he said that if you don't love God's people, you're in the dark.

Those were some very direct words from John, probably disturbing words for those who got caught up in the false teaching of the Gnostics – but now after seeing the error in their ways – John reminds them of just how far they had come and the spiritual victory they have already attained. These were words of assurance – they were words of encouragement, and there are times when we all need some encouragement no matter what stage in the Christian life you may be at.

Many years ago, a "Dear Abby" advice column ran a story by a retired schoolteacher and this is what it read:

One day she had her students take out two sheets of paper and list the names of the other students in the room. Then she told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down by their names. She took the papers home that weekend and she compiled a list for each student of what the others had said about him or her.

On Monday she gave each student his or her list. Before long, everyone was smiling. "Really?" one whispered. "I never knew that meant anything to anyone." "I didn't know anyone liked me that much!"

Years later, the teacher went to the funeral of one of her former students, who had been killed in Vietnam. Many who had been in that class years before were there. After the service, the young man's parents approached the teacher and said, "We want to show you something. Mark was carrying this when he was killed." The father pulled out of a wallet the list of all the good things Mark's classmates had said about him. "Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it."

A group of Mark's classmates overheard the conversation. One smiled and said, "I still have my list. It's in my top desk drawer at home." Another said, "I have mine, too. It's in my diary." "I put mine in our wedding album," said a third. "I bet we all saved them," said a fourth. "I carry mine with me at all times." At that point, the teacher sat down and cried. And, she used that assignment in every class for the rest of her teaching career.

That story shows how much we all need encouragement, especially after we have blown it, and to encourage you, John would say,

“In Christ, your sins are forgiven, you are an overcomer even though you are still in the battle, and your heavenly Father knows you, He chose you, He gave His Son for you, and wants you to know Him.”

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