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ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE FAMILY OF GOD

1 John 2:12-14

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1 John Lesson 8

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Years ago, a "Dear Abby" (*Arizona Daily Sun* [1/10/99]) column ran a story by a retired schoolteacher. 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 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 exchange. One smiled sheepishly 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. The apostle John has been dishing out some strong words as he warns the flock about the false teachers who were trying to deceive them. He has just said (2:11) that if you don't love your brother, you're in the darkness—not saved! He is about to say that if you love the

world, you don't have the Father's love in you (2:15). But before he says that, he inserts this short section to encourage those who may have been troubled by what he had written.

John wants his readers, at whatever stage in the Christian life they are at, to consider what God has done in their lives. He wants them to know that they have authentic faith. (John inserts other similar assuring clarifications in 3:19-22 and 4:17-18.) John Calvin put it (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 182), "having faithfully spoken of good works, lest he should seem to give them more importance than he ought to have done, he carefully calls us back to contemplate the grace of Christ."

Six times John uses the perfect tense in the explanatory ("because") clauses. It describes action completed in the past with ongoing results. John Stott (*The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 98) explains, "John is laying emphasis on the assured standing into which every Christian has come, whatever his stage of spiritual development." To grow, we must be assured and encouraged about what God has done and is doing in our lives.

In many ways this is a difficult text to understand. It raises several questions: (1) Why does John use "write" in the present tense three times and then shift to the aorist three times? (The NIV obscures this, translating them all the same.) (2) Why does he use different terms for "children"? (The NIV also obscures this; I recommend that you use the NASB or the ESV as a study Bible.) (3) Why does he say the particular things that he says with each group? Is there a reason for each emphasis? (4) Why does he repeat the exact words about the fathers, and almost repeat identical information about the other groups? (5) Why does he use the sequence: children, fathers, young men, rather than a chronological one?

I do not promise to give definitive answers to all of those questions, although I will try to explain some of them throughout the message. With regard to why John changes the tense of the verb, "I am writing," I have not found any satisfactory answers, except that it is a stylistic change that calls attention to the repetitive structure of the text. As to why John repeats himself, perhaps the best answer is that as a good teacher, he used repetition to drive these points home. John's main application is,

Wherever you're at in your Christian walk, God wants you to be encouraged by His grace so that you will grow more.

1. There are stages of growth in the Christian life: Don't be content with where you're at, but seek to grow.

Commentators divide over whether John is talking about two or three groups here. Those who advocate two groups point out that John uses the Greek word translated "little children" six other times in this epistle to address the entire church (2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). The other word, translated "children" (2:13; 2:14 in Greek text) occurs again in 1 John only in 2:18, where it addresses the entire church. So they argue that John addresses the entire church under the terms, "little children" and "children," and then divides them up into "fathers" and "young men." This view also helps to explain why John does not follow a chronological order from youngest to oldest.

Others, however, argue that John is addressing three groups in terms of spiritual maturity (not chronological age). The odd order may be explained as his taking both ends of the spectrum first, and then showing the means of getting from the one end to the other. I am comfortable with this three-fold breakdown, as long as we keep in mind that what John writes to the little children also applies to every stage of the Christian life. Even mature believers need to remember that our sins have been forgiven and that we know God as our Father. Also, the little children in the faith and the young men need to see clearly the goal of becoming spiritual fathers, who "know Him who has been from the beginning." And the children need to be prepared for the battles against the enemy that they must win in order to grow to maturity.

But the point is clear, both here and in other Scriptures, that we should never be complacent with where we're at in our Christian walk, but should daily strive to know Christ better in order to grow to maturity. Physical growth is normal for children, and it's always abnormal when children do not grow and mature. Even spiritual adults should always press on toward the goal of knowing Jesus Christ better and growing in godliness (Phil. 3:7-16; Heb. 5:11-6:3; Hos. 6:3). If you become spiritually complacent, you will not remain neutral; you will go backwards.

I'm convinced that God's grace as shown to us on the cross is the greatest motivator to keep growing.

2. God wants us to be encouraged by His grace so that we will be motivated to grow.

Frankly, often it is more difficult for those of us from Christian homes to appreciate God's grace as the motivator to grow. Those who have been saved from a difficult past know where they would be if God had not intervened in their lives. They are more likely to see that they have been forgiven much, and thus to love Christ much (Luke 7:36-50).

Those of us who grew up in the church are prone to think pharisaically that we didn't need as much forgiveness as the person with a sordid past. We need to see how wretchedly sinful our hearts really are. If God had let me go, I'd be enslaved to a multitude of terrible sins. With the hymn writer, we need to sing often, "O to grace, how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be; let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee" (Robert Robinson, "Come Thou Fount"). God's grace encourages me to grow in my walk with Him. John presents three stages of growth:

- A. The foundation of the Christian life is to know that your sins are forgiven and to know the Father.

Here we're focusing on John's twofold address to the "little children" (2:12) and the "children" (2:13). If there is a nuance of difference between the two terms, "little children" (from a Greek word meaning, to beget or bring forth) points to the relationship by birth between a child and his parents. "Children" (from a Greek word emphasizing training) points to children under discipline or training. By using both terms, John shows his *authority* as an apostle and his *affection* as a spiritual father to his family.

- (1) As God's little children, we need to be encouraged by the truth that our sins are forgiven for His name's sake.

"I'm writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake" (2:12). Don't ever allow yourself to read a verse like that and think, "Ho hum!" The forgiveness of all of your sins for His name's sake is the greatest blessing in the whole world! Never get over the amazing truth that

although you were a rebel who deserved God's wrath, He graciously sent His Son to bear the penalty in your place!

As David exclaims (Ps. 32:1-2), "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity," After rehearsing the sins of Israel in the wilderness, Nehemiah (9:17b) proclaims, "But You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness."

Jesus' last words to the disciples before He ascended into heaven were (Luke 24:47), "that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." John Bunyan has a wonderful book, "The Jerusalem Sinner Saved," where he expounds on the fact that the good news of forgiveness of sins be proclaimed *first* in the very city that crucified the Savior.

When John tells the little children in the faith that their sins are forgiven "for His name's sake," he means that their sins are forgiven on account of the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Our sins are not forgiven because of anything that we do. We cannot do penance to work off our debt of sin, because Jesus paid the debt in full. We cannot add good works to atone for our sins, because Jesus atoned for them fully through His blood.

Maybe you're thinking, "But you don't know all the terrible things that I have done. Doesn't a really bad sinner have to do something to qualify for God's forgiveness?" Learn from the apostle Paul, who calls himself the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). In Ephesians 1:7-8, he writes, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us." Forgiveness of sins is *for His name's sake*, not for anything you have done or can do. All you can do is receive it by faith.

Notice, too, that forgiveness of sins is something that the youngest child of God can and should experience. It is foundational to your Christian walk that you know that your sins are forgiven, not because of anything in you, but solely because of what Jesus did for you on the cross. The enemy will repeatedly come to accuse and condemn you for your sins. Answer him every time, not

with your performance, but with the name and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(2) As God's children, we need to be encouraged by the fact that we have come to know the Father.

"I have written to you, children, because you know the Father" (2:13b). As with the forgiveness of sins, so knowing God as your Father is foundational to your Christian walk. In his classic book, *Knowing God* ([IVP], p. 182), J. I. Packer wrote,

You sum up the whole of New Testament teaching in a single phrase, if you speak of it as a revelation of the Fatherhood of the holy Creator. In the same way, you sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.

Recently our daughter and son-in-law and their 16-month-old daughter lived with us for three months. Our little granddaughter cannot talk in sentences yet, but she knows the word "daddy" ("Da-da" in her words). When she hears that daddy is home from work, she lights up with a smile and runs to see him. Little children love their daddy. They trust him to provide for all of their needs and to protect them from harm and danger. From an early age, they imitate their daddy. When they get older and go to school, they promote his glory by telling other kids what their daddy can do. If they are properly trained, they also learn to submit to their daddy's authority.

From the earliest stage of our Christian life, we should know God as our Father. He loves us and cares for us far more than any earthly father ever could. As John will go on to say (3:1), "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are." Knowing that God has forgiven all your sins and that He is your Father are foundational to your Christian life. Never forget these precious truths!

- B. The goal of the Christian life is to be spiritual fathers, who know Him who has been from the beginning.

John jumps from the beginning to the end, before going back to the means of getting from one to the other. Both times, for emphasis, he repeats exactly the same thing, that the fathers “know Him who has been from the beginning.” The verb, *know*, is in the perfect tense, meaning, you have come to know Him and still know Him. The Greek verb means to know by experience.

But, why does John refer to God as “Him who has been from the beginning”? Why is *this* a distinctive of those who are spiritually mature? I suggest three reasons:

- (1) The phrase focuses on the eternity of God, and spiritual maturity involves developing an eternal perspective on life.

This phrase prepares us for the next section, where John says (2:17), “For the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives [lit., *abides*] forever.” The older you get, the more you realize how short and uncertain this life really is. As you grow older, you see more clearly that all of the things that people strive to attain—riches, recognition, pleasure, adventure, or whatever—fade away in the face of death and eternity. The earlier in your Christian life that you can learn that the Lord Jesus Christ is the eternal One, who was with the Father in the beginning, and that you will quickly step out of time and into eternity, the more you will grow spiritually. That eternal perspective will help you not to get enamored by the world and the things in the world.

- (2) The phrase points us to God’s eternal purpose in Christ, and to the wonderful fact that it included us by His sovereign choice.

Paul wrote (Eph. 1:8b-12),

In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined

according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.

Babes in Christ often stumble over the doctrine of God's sovereign election, but spiritual fathers submit to it and, as Jesus did, they rejoice in it (see Luke 10:21-22). We rejoice in it because it means that salvation is not a matter of our feeble human will, but rather of God's mighty will and purpose. All praise goes to Him for the wonder that "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4)!

- (3) The phrase points us to Jesus Christ as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end, of our Christian experience.

(See Rev. 1:8, 17.) All of God's riches are ours in Christ. We will spend all eternity plumbing the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, which surpasses all knowledge (Eph. 3:18-19). And so the goal of the Christian life is to grow into spiritual fathers, who "know Him who has been from the beginning." Of course, that process never is complete, and so we should always be pressing on to know Him better. But, how do we grow from spiritual children to be fathers in the faith?

- C. The means of attaining the goal is to be strong young men who overcome the evil one through God's Word.

John writes to the young men, "because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one" (2:14). These words show us that the Christian life is not a perpetual Sunday School picnic! It is an intense battle with the enemy of our souls, who seeks to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8).

While we can and should experience victories over the temptations that the enemy puts in our path, there is another sense in which such victories are never complete or final. He doesn't give up! So we must understand the victories of these spiritually strong young men in a relative sense. Also, even when we win such victories, we are never strong in ourselves, but only in the Lord, and in the strength of His might (Eph. 6:10). Often the weapons that the enemy brings against us are not frontal, but rather deceptive. As Paul wrote (2 Cor. 11:3), "But I am afraid that, as the serpent de-

ceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." So we must always be alert to his schemes (2 Cor. 2:11).

It is only when you allow the Word of God to abide in you that you will overcome the enemy's schemes. The Lord Jesus overcame the tempter every time by citing Scripture (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). The only way that you will grow strong spiritually and overcome the evil one is to let the Word of God dwell in your heart by meditating on it day and night (Ps. 1:2) and treasuring it in your heart (Ps. 119:9, 11).

Conclusion

Most of us probably can remember our defeats much more easily than we can remember our victories. God doesn't want your defeats to sabotage your Christian walk. His grace means that your sins are forgiven and that you are now His child. Knowing that should not lead you to sin more, but rather to be encouraged to grow more.

The German poet, Goethe, said, "Correction does much, but encouragement does more." The Bible has both, of course, in proportion to what we need. Here, John wants to encourage us, no matter where we're at in our level of maturity. But to be effective, encouragement must be true, not mere flattery. The truest thing about you is what God says in His Word. If you have trusted in Jesus Christ, God says that your sins are forgiven for His name's sake. He says that you have come to know Him as Father. He wants you to grow strong through His Word, so that you will overcome the evil one. As you do, you will grow into a mature believer, who knows Him who is from the beginning. That's why John wrote these encouraging words.

Application Questions

1. Why is motivation so important in Christian growth? How can we maintain it?
2. Why is knowing that you're forgiven so basic to the Christian life (see 2 Pet. 1:9)? Is there a danger of abusing this truth?
3. How can a person who did not have a loving earthly father grow to appreciate God as his heavenly Father?
4. What has God used most to encourage you in your walk with Him? How can you be an encouragement to others?

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