

1 John 2:12-14

INTRODUCTION: 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.

CONTEXT:

John has been giving the reader some objective tests as a guide to know authentic faith when they see it.

In fact in chapter 2 he will give us five test for self-examination.

In doing so he has made some strong statements.

For example:

1. The Test of Obedience – 1 John 2:3-4

If you say you know him and do not keep His commandments John says you are a liar.

2. The Test of Love – 1 John 2:9-11

Anyone who claims to walk in the light (be saved) and hates his brother walks in darkness.

You are deceived and blind.

3. He will later give the “Test of Worldliness” in 2:15

He will say if you love the world you don’t have the love of the Father in you.

4. But before he does that he inserts this short section to encourage those who may have been troubled by what he has written so far.

John is not writing to cause doubt, but quite the opposite. He writes to strengthen their assurance in the faith.

John doesn’t want to come across totally negative to his readers.

If you are not careful in giving these spiritual tests for self-examination you can become overly negative about this matter of assurance.

QUOTE: John realizes that much of his teaching has been intensely soul-searching and can be disturbing, even for true believers. Satan might twist John’s words to dishearten many of the weaker believers; some . . . might even question how they could hope to meet the standards John upheld for truth.” [Joel Beeke, *The Epistles of John*, p. 78.]

So John uses an encouraging tone here in this next test he is going to give.

He writes to encourage them. He calls upon them to consider what God has done in their lives.

He pauses here to remind believers of what God did in their life in bringing them to saving faith.

It is as if John is saying, "I can see God's work of grace in your life."

I can see spiritual growth in you!

Six times John uses the explanatory word "because" in the perfect tense.

Remember what I taught you about perfect tense. Perfect tense is completed action with ongoing results.

I write unto you because . . . your sins are forgiven.

I write unto you because . . . you have know Him that is from the beginning.

I write unto you because . . . you have overcome the wicked one.

I write unto you because . . . you are strong and the Word of God abides in you.

He wants them to know that they have authentic faith.

He does this at other places in this letter as well.

Notice 1 John 2:19-20, 21

John says you have the Holy Spirit, you know the truth.

QUOTE: John Calvin put it like this. He wrote, “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.”

5. In many ways these verses are somewhat difficult to understand.

(a) Why does John use “write” in the present tense three times and then shift to the aorist three times, “I have written”? (The NIV obscures this, translating them all the same.)

(b) Why does John use three different expressions to refer to his readers?

John makes six statements about his readers in verse 12-14, arranged in two sets of three statements each.

The first statement is made to “little children.”

The second statement is made to “young men.”

The third statement is made to “fathers.”

(c) Why does he use different Greek terms for “children”? (The NIV also obscures this; I recommend that you use the NASB or the ESV as a study Bible.)

(d) Why does he say the particular things that he says with each group? Is there a reason for each emphasis?

Commentaries differ about the reason for this.

Commentators and Scholars have differing views as to what these groups represent.

(i) ***Literal Age view*** – some say John is pointing out three age groups in the church.

He referring to their literal physical age. – Problem is this leaves some out. Did he wish to encourage three groups all male?

(ii) ***Three ways of looking at all Christians*** – so each remark refers to all believers he just looks at them a different way.

(iii) ***Elders and Deacons*** – another view is that “little children refer to all believers, then fathers and young men refer to Elders and Deacons.

(iv) ***Mature and Immature*** – Little children refers to all believers but Fathers refers to the mature and young men to the immature.

For example Luther and Calvin think that John is referring to only two categories of Christians, the mature or the immature. They view the term “little children” as applicable to all Christians.

(v) ***Deliberately ambivalent*** – I even read one scholar who said, “We need to avoid making any decisions because John is being, ‘deliberately ambivalent’ so we don’t know.”

(vi) ***Three levels of Spiritual Maturity*** – John is speaking figuratively here about three groups in the church.

These are not literal ages. It is rather levels of spiritual maturity.

He is not speaking about men only. In this day they used the masculine in general to refer to both. (like mankind).

I think this is the best explanation of the three groups. The three groups represent three levels of spiritual maturity.

Just like in physical life there are stages of growth and maturity so it is in the spiritual life.

ILLUSTRATION: This is the view of the early church father Augustine. He said, that John is speaking to three groups in various stages of spiritual development.

What John is doing in these verses is giving another test of authentic Christianity.

We can call this next test:

6. The Test of Spiritual Growth

A true believer will experience some measure of spiritual growth in their life.

Where there is life there is growth.

Where ever God imparts His salvation there will be spiritual growth.

Or another way to say it is like this. Wherever there has been justification there will be some measure of sanctification.

ARGUMENT: John is saying to the believers he is writing to, “I can see levels of spiritual maturity in you.”

Again, he wants to encourage them on to spiritual maturity and growth. He wants to encourage them in this matter of assurance.

QUOTE: 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.”

APPLICATION: So in our spiritual self-examination we must ask ourselves this question.

Am I growing spiritually?

Is there progress being made in my spiritual walk and journey?

What is spiritual growth?

7. Defining Spiritual Growth

In order to understand if we are growing spiritually we must understand what it is.

a. It is not a matter of time.

Some people have been saved a long time and have not grown much spiritually.

b. It is not a matter of knowledge only.

There are some who have a tremendous amount of knowledge but it is all theoretical.

They do not put it to practice. The issue is not knowledge alone.

“Knowledge puffs up...”

c. It is not a matter of activity.

Some people think that because they are busy and involved in doing all these spiritual activities they are growing.

ILLUSTRATION: Mary and Martha. Martha was busy and Mary sat at the feet of Jesus.

d. It is not a matter of prosperity.

Some think well look how prosperous I am I must be spiritual.

Many equate their economic situation with the favor of God.

The quality of your life and character cannot be determined by your circumstances.

e. It is not a matter of God's love.

Some think if we do as God wants he loves us more and the more He loves us the more we grow.

Scripture says God loved us while we were sinners and furthermore He loves us perfectly.

He cannot love us more and will not love us less.

God's love is not based on your performance it is unconditional.

f. It is not a matter of giftedness.

Some may think they are spiritual because they possess some great spiritual gifts.

But giftedness is no sign of spiritual maturity.

ILLUSTRATION: Corinthians, Paul said they came behind in no spiritual gift. Yet he had to speak to them as babes.

f. It is not a matter of your position.

Spiritual growth is not a question of your position in Christ because you were placed in Christ the moment you put your faith in Him.

1) 2 Corinthians 5:17 -- "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation...."

2) Colossians 2:10 -- "And ye are complete in Him...."

3) 2 Peter 1:3 -- The believer receives "all things that pertain unto life and godliness...."

When you became a believer, you were placed into Christ.

You received all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies and all things that pertain to life and godliness.

Therefore you became complete in Him, positionally.

Spiritual growth is not a matter of your position in Christ.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

It is learning all that we have been given in Christ and applying it so that we are conformed to His image.

Bringing our practice up to match our position.

ILLUSTRATION: Gift of this incredible computer software program.

Has hundreds of books, maybe a thousand. Hebrew and Greek lexicons etc.

I have spent years trying to learn all I received.

Many times I have bought a book at a store or conference only to find that I already have it in that software.

They have training course on how to know and apply all you have been given in that software program.

So it is with salvation.

I have been saved many years and I am still trying to learn and apply all I have been given in Christ.

ARGUMENT: God has downloaded us with the riches of His grace.

We have been given all these spiritual blessings. Spiritual growth is learning more and more about this abundant grace that God has given us.

THAT IS WHY IT IS CALLED GROWING IN GRACE.

That is why Peter said, “But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It is this very grace of God that should encourage us to grow!

ILLUSTRATION: 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.

TRANSITIONAL SENTENCE: John presents three stages of growth. I want us to look a little closer at them.

I. Little Children: Spiritual Discovery. 2:12, 13c

John starts out describing spiritual maturity at the most basic level.

Little children – two words, teknon and paidion.

EXPLANATION: Both speak of a small child that can range from infant to seven years old.

This speaks figuratively of those who are newly saved.

1 Peter 2:2 “as newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the Word...”

They are discovering basic truths.

A. The Reality of Forgiveness. 2:12, 13c

The first thing one learns when you get saved is that you have been forgiven.

Some think this is a given that Christians understand the nature of God's forgiveness towards them but it is not.

ILLUSTRATION: I had a dear sweet Christian woman come to me and ask me what happens if I die with unconfessed sins?

LISTEN, A Christian is not a person who is seeking forgiveness, or is hoping to be forgiven!

A Christian is not a person who is uncertain about forgiveness or who prays for it, or who tries to merit it.

CHRISTIANS ARE THOSE WHO KNOW THEY HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN.

This is absolutely fundamental to salvation!

ILLUSTRATION: So many people when you ask them if they know that their sins have been forgiven say, “I am hoping that they are, I am asking forgiveness, I am praying for it. I am uncertain about it but I hope they will be forgiven me.

NO THAT IS NOT THE CHRISTIAN POSITION!

A CHRISTIAN IS SOMEONE WHO KNOWS THEIR SINS HAVE ALREADY BEEN FORGIVEN.

1. The Basis of This Forgiveness

Notice verse 12 - “for his name’s sake”

It is on the basis of the perfect, the finished, the complete work of Christ on the cross, not because of our goodness or merit.

Our forgiveness is based on God's acceptance of Christ's Sacrifice.

GOD FORGIVES US BECAUSE OF CHRIST.

Notice 1 John 2:1 – I know my sins have been forgiven because Jesus Christ is standing before the throne as my representative with God.

^{ESV} **Romans 8:1** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Since salvation God does not put anymore sins on our record.

^{KJV} **Psalms 32:2** Blessed *is* the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit *there is* no guile.

^{KJV} **Psalms 86:5** For thou, Lord, *art* good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.

^{KJV} **Psalms 25:11** For thy name's sake, O LORD, pardon mine iniquity; for it *is* great.

^{KJV} **Isaiah 43:25** I, *even* I, *am* he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.

ARGUMENT: If you claim to be a Christian and are uncertain about your forgiveness it is because you fail to understand the reason God forgives sin!

2. *The Blessings of This Forgiveness*

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."

ILLUSTRATION: 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.

That is a basic discovery any true believer needs to grasp this basic truth.

B. The Relationship with the Father. v. 13c

Little children – Greek word “paidia” small child.

They are learning elementary things.

1. A Delight to Behold

ILLUSTRATION: Our little grandson Theo is growing. We are waiting to hear those words “Dada.”

Little children cannot speak in sentences but they love their dada.

His little face lights up when he sees his father or mother.

They love their father and have a natural trust for Him to provide everything.

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.

So it is spiritually.

Notice: “because you have known the Father” That is a salvation expression.

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!

ARGUMENT: John acknowledges this in them. John is saying I write to you because I know you have known the Father.

“have known” – perfect indicative, an action complete in the past with continuing results in the present.

Knowing the Father, salvation has changed their life.

John is saying I have seen the change in you.

2. A Danger to Beware

Danger: At this level a person can be tossed to and fro carried about with every wind of doctrine.

They are susceptible to every new fade that comes along under the guise of Christian.

They can easily get sucked into a fade—they are many movements out there that can get a new believer off track. They keep you immature and do not lead to maturity.

New believer lacks spiritual discernment.

Hebrews 5:12-14 ¹² For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which *be* the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. ¹³ For every one that useth milk *is* unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. ¹⁴ But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

1 Corinthians 3:1-2 ^{KJV} **1 Corinthians 3:1** And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, *even* as unto babes in Christ. ² I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able *to bear it*, neither yet now are ye able.

That is why God gave to the church Pastor/teachers to help you mature in Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-15 ¹¹ And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; ¹² For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: ¹³ Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: ¹⁴ That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things,

II. Young Men: Spiritual Discernment. 2:13b, 14b

Here is another level.

What is characteristic of this level? Strength!

A. Their Strength - v. 14c “because ye are strong”

“you are strong” – present indicative “you are becoming strong.

Here is a believer that is growing strong. How?

B. Their Source. v. 14 c “the Word of God abideth in you”

Abide – present indicative “continually abides in you”

A person grows strong spiritually, matures spiritually because they abide continually in the Word of God.

What food is to the body God's Word is to the soul!

God's people need the Word of God to grow.

^{JV} **1 Peter 2:2** As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:

Jesus prayed for us in John 17:

^{KJV} **John 17:17** Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

ILLUSTRATION: That's why we major on the Word of God. It is central.

ARGUMENT: In our country it is sad to say but there are many ministries that major on none essentials, that try to give people what they want and meet felt needs.

They keep people at an immature level. They offer themselves as a model of ministry.

Their people are left struggling with little or no ability to discern between truth and error.

Major on music, major on trying to connect with the culture, entertainment.

Christians lack the basic discernment needed to protect themselves.

John is concerned with this very issue.

Notice: 2:18, 2:26; 4:1

C. Their Success – v. 13c, 14c

“overcome” – a verb form of the Greek word “nikao.”

Where we get our word “nike.” It means to triumph, to conquer, to prevail, to win.

At this stage of spiritual maturity one learns how to overcome sin and Satan.

One is no longer victimized by error.

THEY LEARN TO DISCERN TRUTH AND ERROR!

Whereas the last stage was more of an emotional attachment to God, now they take a rational approach to understanding the truth.

ILLUSTRATION: God has given us all thing that pertain unto life and godliness now they want to know what those things are.

ILLUSTRATION: A young man that got saved, he was so filled with joy, excitement, love, gratitude. Every day was great. Came to my office every day bubbling over.

One day he came and was in despair, depressed. He had lost that joy of salvation. He lost the excitement.

He asked me what happened to me? Why do I feel like this?

Satan was waiting, he was tempted and sinned, and stolen his joy.

He learned something new—The Christian life is warfare! I encouraged him to pick up his sword and fight.

IT IS TIME TO GROW STRONG.
IT IS TIME TO LEARN HOW TO DO BATTLE AGAINST SIN,
SATAN.

WITH GOD'S HELP YOU LEARN TO OVERCOME. YOU
LEARN TO BE VICTORIOUS.

WHEN THIS HAPPENS YOU REACH A NEW LEVEL OF JOY.

God will allow you to feel deeply and experience the pain of your own depravity and attacks from Satan to remind you to depend more on Him and to grow strong in the Word.

ILLUSTRATION: Poem,

I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith and love and ev'ry grace,
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer,
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favored hour
At once He'd answer my request
And, by His love's constraining pow'r,
Subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in ev'ry part.

God will allow you to go through spiritual warfare and struggle to grow to another level.

As you learn truth and apply it you grow- you learn to discern error and Satan's wiles. 99 % of Satan's activities are lies and deception.

We must learn to do battle with Satan's lies.

DEVELOP A WARRIOR MENTALITY!

ILLUSTRATION: I love to see people at this stage. They become serious students of Scripture.

Danger: Becoming overbearing. Sometimes young men are hard to deal with. They can be lifted up with pride, all truth no mercy.

When you grow to learn to discern between truth and error and overcome the wicked one you have reached a new level of maturity.

III. Fathers: Spiritual Depth. 2:13a, 14

Notice the repeated phrase “known Him” but here John adds “from the beginning”

A. Know Experientially

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.

This is someone who has walked with God for many, many, many years.

They have known the Father for a long time.

They have developed a depth of spiritual strength and devotion that one can only get by years of walking with God.

They have fought many battles

They have gone through many trials and tests

They have walked with God through many valleys

They have won many victories.

They have carried many crosses.

They have exchanged their sword for a harp.

They have exchanged a warrior mentality for a worship mentality.

THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF MATURITY AND SANCTIFICATION IS TO KNOW GOD.

ILLUSTRATION: When I turned 30 I wanted to build a large church. At 40 I wanted to learn how to preach. But at 50 I want to know God deeply. [*Truman Dollar in Fundamentalist Journal (Nov. 1987). Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 5.*]

This is where you are more concerned about loving God, adoring God, worshipping God.

B. Know Eternally

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?

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 Jesus Christ as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end, of our Christian experience.

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.

CONCLUSION:

- I. Little children: Spiritual Discovery
 - II. Young Men: Spiritual Discernment
 - III. Fathers: Spiritual Depth
-

How does all this relate to John message of assurance of salvation?

The believers to whom John was writing were wrestling with doubt because of the false teachers that left the church.

The false teacher told them they were not really saved.

John wants to encourage them.

ILLUSTRATION: I heard about a Pastor who once entered a greasy-spoon restaurant for breakfast, and when the waitress, groggy and disinterested, took his order, he replied, “Bring me some ham and eggs and a few kind words.”

When she returned fifteen minutes later, she set the food before him and said, “There.”

“What about the kind words?”

The server looked him over a moment, then replied, “I’d advise you not to eat them eggs!”^{*1}

John is saying to the believers to whom he is writing to, don’t eating what those false teachers are serving.

They are telling you that you are not really Christians. I am writing to you because your sins have been forgiven, your are

* James Dobson, *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives* (Waco: Word Publishing, 1980), 171.

¹ Robert J. Morgan, [*Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes*](#), electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 263–264.

strong the Word of God abides in you, you have overcome the wicked one and you have known Him that is from the beginning.

John was saying to the believers to whom he was writing, I see spiritual growth in you.

When you experience spiritual growth it becomes a great means of assurance.

TEST OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH EXPERIENCE

SO ASK YOURSELF ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN YOUR LIFE?

IS IT TAKING PLACE IN YOU?