Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Stages of Spiritual Growth
Scripture: 1 John 2:12-14
Code: 62-14

Let's turn to the Word of God, 1 John chapter 2 tonight, and let me share with you what for many, many years has been one of my favorite...one of the formative passages of Scripture in my own life. First John chapter 2 verses 12 through 14.

Let me read this text because I want you to have it in mind as we talk about it. John writes this, "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His namesake. I'm 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. 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."

Now the first thing that jumps out of this passage at you is there's a sequence here...children, young men, fathers. That's pretty apparent. It starts in verse 12 with the mention of little children. And then in verses 13 and 14 references are made to fathers and young men. And that adds, and even as additional mention of children at the end of verse 13, and that adds up to the three categories of spiritual development. And just so you know at the very outset, that's where we're going with the passage.

When you think about spiritual life, you have to think about growth. And that shouldn't surprise us because when you think about life in any form, life is equal to growth. Growth is evidence of life. You plant a seed in the ground and it grows to a full-sized plant. That's the nature of life. You have a small puppy in your house and it grows to be a big dog. You have a baby in your house and it grows to be an adult. And that's the way life works. Life essentially can be defined as the dynamic of development or the dynamic of growth. Life is equal to growth. Where there's life, there's growth. Where there's growth, there's life.

That is certainly true in the spiritual realm. God who gave us spiritual life in Christ intends for that life to grow, intends for that life to grow into maturity. One of the, I think, difficult things in the human realm is retardation, or some kind of deformity that prevents a child from developing physically or developing mentally. And we see that as a sad reality in life. The failure to grow spiritually is equally tragic, in fact it's more tragic because one cannot enter in to all of the spiritual blessings and benedictions that the Lord has for those who mature in Christ. Spiritual growth then is a privilege, it is also an obligation, it is a responsibility for us. And the goal of spiritual development is to become like Christ. And we know that because that's what the Bible tells us. The Apostle Paul in Philippians chapter 3 talks about that and says it in very clear terms. He says, "This one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the

upward call of God in Christ Jesus." What is the goal? The goal is the prize of the upward call. What's the prize when you're called up? The prize when you're called up is to be like Christ. You'll be like Him because you'll see Him as He is. When we get to heaven we're going to be like Christ. Romans 8:29 says we're going to be conformed to the very form of Christ, God's Son. So the goal of the upward call is to be like Christ. That's the prize. That's what we're going to be when we get to heaven. Paul says, "That being my prize, some day that's what God's going to give me, that becomes my goal even in life. I want to be like Christ."

So when I think about maturity I think about Christ. When I think about being a mature believer, I think about being like Christ. That certainly fits into 1 John, even into chapter 2 because back in verse 6 it says, "The one who says he abides in Him," that is abides in Christ, "ought himself walk in the same manner as He walked." Becoming like Christ is the goal and the objective of the process of spiritual maturity.

Now there's a lot in Scripture about this process of spiritual development and spiritual growth. In Ephesians 4:15 we read how it is important for us to grow up in all things into Him who is the head. And again saying the same thing, to grow up into Christ's likeness. Paul said that that essentially is the objective in the church. The Lord has given to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers for the equipping of the saints, for the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ who we all attain to the unity of the faith, the knowledge of the Son of God to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. And adding in verse 15, we're to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ. God has designed everything within the framework of Christian experience, everything in the church, everything in the life of the church, all of the teaching, all of the ministry, the discipling that goes on to have the effect of growing us into Christ's likeness.

Now the means of that is the Scripture, as we know. First Peter 2:2 says, "Desire the pure milk of the Word that you may grow by it. Just as a baby desires milk in order to grow, you desire the milk of the Word which is your food so that you also can grow."

Spiritual growth is another way to describe what we call sanctification...sanctification. There are really differing elements of sanctification. There is a kind of positional sanctification that occurs when you're saved, you're set apart from sin into a new state in which you're covered by the righteousness of Christ. That is in the past, that happened at salvation. There is a future kind of sanctification, ultimate sanctification that will take place when you're finally and forever and totally separated from sin in your glorification. So there is a forensic or declared sanctification by which you were set apart from sin in the eyes of God by being covered with the righteousness of Christ. There is a future kind of sanctification by which you will be actually set apart from all sin and become righteous in the perfection of eternity. In the middle there is this process of sanctification that is a increasing separation from sin as you move more into spiritual maturity, increasingly becoming like Jesus Christ. As we think about progressive sanctification, which is a pretty common term for this, we can think about it as really a synonym for spiritual development, spiritual growth.

Now I want to give you some statements about spiritual growth because I don't want you to have any

misunderstandings about it. I think this is very formative and very basic for our understanding, so I want it to be clear in your mind. Let me just give you a few things to understand. First of all, spiritual growth has nothing to do with your standing before God in Christ. Spiritual growth has nothing to do with your standing before God in Christ. That's all settled. When you put your trust in Jesus Christ, the righteousness of Christ covered you. The righteousness of God covered you. And that is essentially what the Apostle Paul acknowledged in that same section, Philippians chapter 3, he said that I was found in Him. Verse 9, "Not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith." So your standing before God is set. You have been covered with the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. That doesn't change. Wherever you are in your spiritual growth doesn't change your standing before God. That is fixed forever. In fact, in Colossians 2:10 it says, "In Him you have been made complete." As far as God is concerned, that's settled. He sees us in His Son as righteous. He sees us in His Son as perfect. As we remember from 2 Corinthians 5:21, we have said it many times, "On the cross Jesus took our sin so that He could give us His righteousness." He dies on the cross as if He had lived your sinful life and mine and then God imputes His perfect life to our account as if we had lived His sinless life. That's the glory of the great doctrine of substitution, imputed righteousness. So spiritual growth has nothing to do with your standing before God. If you are a spiritual child, if you are a spiritual young man, or a spiritual father, wherever you are on the process of development, it does not have any impact in your standing before God in Christ. We'll see how that fits into the text of 1 John in a little bit.

Secondly, spiritual growth has nothing to do with God's love for you. It has nothing to do with God's love for you. God doesn't love you more or like you better if you're mature. In fact, in John 13:1 Jesus was meeting with the disciples in the upper room, as you remember we talked about it recently, and it says in that passage that having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto perfection. The Lord loves all of His own to perfection. And the disciples in that case were immature. They were doubters. They were proud. They were, remember, arguing about who of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom and they were utterly insensitive to Jesus facing a cross. But He still loved them to perfection. In fact, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us because God loved us when we were enemies." He loves us with a perfect love. He cannot love us more because we are more mature. He cannot love us less because we are less mature. He loves us into eternal salvation and He loves us into eternal glory.

Where we are in the process of spiritual growth does not affect our standing with Him, nor His love for us. Thirdly, spiritual growth has nothing to do with time...it has nothing to do with time. It is not measured by the calendar. There are people, sadly to say, who have been Christians for a very long time and are still very immature...very immature. Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 3 and said, "I couldn't speak to you as to spiritual men. I couldn't speak to you as to mature people. I could only speak to you as babes in Christ. I only could give you milk to drink, I couldn't give you solid food for you were not yet able to receive it. And indeed even now you are not yet able for you are still fleshly." And this is an indictment to them. By the time that Paul is writing to them, they should have

matured beyond their infancy spiritually. But they didn't because they were all caught up in jealousy and strife and so they were immature.

In Hebrews chapter 5, also the writer of the book of Hebrews notes that given the time people should have been a lot further along in their spiritual development, but they weren't. It comes at the end of the fifth chapter of Hebrews and it points up a principle. He says in verse 12, "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you had need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God." Now here he's talking about people who hadn't even yet become believers but he says you've had plenty of time, you've had enough time and enough exposure to be teachers. And instead of being teachers, you need to be taught the basics. It is frankly common, it is very common for people to be Christians for decades and remain infants, bound in immaturity, characterized by jealousy, strife, conflict, lack of discernment, all those things that characterize children, weakness, doesn't have to do with time.

Fourthly, spiritual growth is not related to knowledge, per se, it is not related to knowledge per se. It is not related to acquiring biblical information or biblical theology, or systematic theology. There are people who have accumulated biblical information and who maintain tragic levels of immaturity. Unless that knowledge is pure and unless it is applied so as to conform your life to Christ, it does nothing but fill your mind with facts. And that's pretty dangerous because the more biblical information you receive and don't apply, the more deceived you are about your true state of immaturity. If it isn't life changing, it becomes spiritual deadening.

Fifthly, spiritual growth has nothing to do with activity, and I'm talking about even church activity or Christian ministry activity. Some of the most tragically immature people that I've ever met are the heads of some of the largest ministries of the world. And I'm not going to name names, but I'm telling you, some of THE most immature Christians that I have ever met are the head of the some of the largest Christian organizations in the world. Busy...busy themselves with all kinds of people surrounding them who are equally busy but there's no evidence of maturity.

Just want to throw this in, number six, spiritual growth has nothing to do with temporal success. Spiritual growth has nothing to do with temporal success, material goods, the size of the church, the size of the class, the level of influence. These things are not signs of maturity. Having material goods, being prosperous, those things do not at all prove maturity. They have no connection to it. The Apostle Paul was content with suffering and persecution and weakness and all the rest of it and the fact that he was content with nothing was the true sign of his maturity.

So I think when we talk about spiritual growth, just need to kind of clear the deck of some of the misconceptions and that's what I want you to do in just saying that. It has nothing to do with your standing before God, that's fixed. It has nothing to do with God's love for you, that's established for eternity. It has nothing to do with time, there are people who have been Christians a long time and they're not mature. There are people who have been Christians a short time and they're progressing rapidly toward maturity. It has nothing to do with information, even biblical information because you can have information that's not really applied. It has nothing to do with activity, busyness doesn't equate to spiritual maturity. It has nothing to do with prosperity, temporal success, material benefit,

the size of ministry, level of influence is not necessarily a measure of one's maturity.
Now I want to say something else. Spiritual maturity is not absolute, it is relative. When you talk about spirituality or carnality, you're talking about something that's absolute. At any given moment in time you're either in the Spirit or in the flesh. That's an absolute at any point in time. You may be saved for two weeks and you at any given moment if you're walking in the Spirit, obeying the Word of God, you're spiritual. If you're not, you're carnal, you're fleshly. You may be a Christian for 50 years and in the times when you're walking in the Spirit and obeying the Word of God you are spiritual, and the times you're not, you are fleshly. That is an absolute. You could say that at any point in the life of a believer they're either in the Spirit or in the flesh, they're either functioning in obedience to God and walking in the Spirit, or they're functioning in disobedience to God and walking in the flesh. That's an absolute at any given point in time. Maturity is a relative thing. It's not an absolute in that you are or you aren't, it's relative as you grow. But I will tell you this, the only times you grow are the times when you are spiritual. The times when you're carnal, you fall back. So spiritual growth is the relative spiritual development of a person through all the accumulated times of walking in the Spirit. So the more you walk in the Spirit, the more you're going to grow.
Now there are a number of ways in which the Bible defines spiritual growth. It calls it "following after righteousness," 1 Timothy 6:11. It calls it "being transformed by the renewing of your mind," Romans 12:2. It calls it "perfecting holiness in the fear of God," 2 Corinthians 7:1. As we noted earlier, it calls it "pressing toward the mark," Philippians 3:14. Colossians 2:7 says, "It's being built up in the faith." This is spiritual growth. It's not mystical. It's not sentimental. It's not devotional. It's not psychological. It's not due to an experience. It's not due to an event. It's not due to a decision. It's not due to a rededication. It's not due to a secret insight any more than your growth is due to any of those. Your growth as a living human being is not due to anything mystical, sentimental, devotional, psychological, it's not due to any event, it's not due to any commitment or decision, it is a process...it's a process of feeding your body so that it can develop. And that's the same in the spiritual dimension, it is a process of taking in the truth of God and growing on the basis of believing and responding to that truth. To put it simply, you cannot grow spiritually unless you grow in your understanding of God's truth. That's the only way to get there. "Man doesn't live by bread alone, but he lives by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," Jesus said. Life is growth and growth comes by eating and the food that you have is not bread, but it is every word that comes out of the mouth of God. Spiritual growth is directly related to an increase in your understanding of God's revelation.
Now in our text in 1 John, this is wonderfully instructive treatment of the three stages of spiritual growth. Obviously there are a whole continuum in between, but there are sort of three categories that you grow in that are named here. Children, young men and fathers...obviously that's how it is in the human realm, using a man as an illustration, provides a very instructive framework for us to understand spiritual growth.
Now I want to give you the context because you might wonder, "Well how do we...we've just been dealing with tests of true Christianity, you know, the doctrinal tests, the tests about Christ, do you believe in the true Christ? The doctrinal test about sin, do you recognize your sin? And then the moral

test about obedience and the moral test about love. We've gone through all of these tests to verify one's spiritual condition to give evidence that one's salvation is real. And this is a very important paragraph put in here by the Holy Spirit through John because he needs to affirm to the readers that by offering these tests, listen carefully, he is not doubting their salvation. He's not doubting their salvation, he's simply helping them to understand how they can discern that the false professors and the false prophets that are in their midst are not in fact the real thing. The epistle was not written to create doubt in the minds of true believers. And for that, I go back again to chapter 5 verse 13 which is the stated purpose of this epistle. "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God in order that you may know that you have eternal life." He didn't write this epistle to make you doubt, he wrote the epistle to confirm your salvation because you're going to read this epistle and when he says a true believer acknowledges sin, you're going to say, "I acknowledge my sin." And when he says a true believer acknowledges that Christ is Lord, you're going to say, "I acknowledge that." And when he says a true believer has a desire from the heart to obey God and to love others, you're going to say, "I experience that reality." And so this then is going to confirm your salvation. And what it's going to do is expose those people who deny Christ, expose those people who deny their sin and say they don't sin, expose those people who hate others, expose those people who don't obey the Word of God, expose those people who love the world and the things of the world. That's what it's intended to do. It's intended to help believers to be able to discern. That's why he starts in verse 12 with this, "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His namesake. And I'm writing to you because you are the forgiven."

And back in chapter 1 verse 4, "And these things we write so that our joy may be made complete." I want you to affirm your salvation, I want you to know you are forgiven, and I want you to have complete joy. Then he says, "And I want you also to understand that because you're not a spiritual father, or even a spiritual young man in the process of spiritual growth, doesn't mean you're not a Christian." And that's why he transitions into this. Look, there's room in the Kingdom for spiritual babies. There's room in the Kingdom for spiritual young men. There's of course room in the Kingdom for spiritual fathers. That's his point. There is room for stages of growth. You know, somebody might read John and say, "Boy, there's just no air here, there's no space, as we talked about a few months ago." But there is right here, he's saying...Look, I don't expect all of you to be living this out in its perfection. So he starts with a general statement in verse 12. "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His namesake."

He knows the people to whom he writes. And he knows they're believers, they're forgiven. And this broadens to include all of those who have sound doctrine about Christ and sound doctrine about their sinful condition and whose lives have been transformed so that they live in obedience to the Word of God from the heart and they love each other. He writes to those true believers and all of them are the little children. Now when he says "little children" in verse 12, he's talking about all believers...he uses the word teknia. Now that word simply means "born ones," without regard for age. Okay? Without regard for age. I am a child and I will be a child till I die in the sense that I will always be the child of my parents. We are all our parents' children. So I'm writing to all of you who are the children of God,

all of you teknia...common biblical word for the saved, the children of God. And one thing is true of all of you, he says, "Your sins are forgiven you." You've all been forgiven. And as I said earlier, it's not about your relationship or your standing before God, that is fixed. Spiritual growth is not about God's loving you more or less, you're already fully loved so that your sins are forgiven because Christ has paid in full the penalty for those sins.

So one thing is true of all believers wherever they are in the spiritual growth plain, all believers have all their sins forgiven. So it's not about your standing before God. That's settled. It's not about God's love for you. That's settled. And this is the great reality of salvation, forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness. Ephesians 1:7, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us." He lavished His grace in a complete forgiveness that covered everything. And in Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." This is at the heart of our salvation. Even in 1 John back in chapter 1 verse 7, he says, "If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin." Chapter 3 verse 5 of 1 John, "You know that He appeared in order to take away sins." That's why He came, to take away sins. Scripture is filled with these statements that salvation is the forgiveness of sins.

Just a couple come to mind. One is in Acts 10, yes it's verse 43, "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." That's what Peter said. And that is exactly what salvation is, it's the forgiveness of sins. Also in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Acts there is a marvelous statement in verse 38, "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you...through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. And through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses." All things meaning the just punishment of a holy God. That's why Jesus said at the end of the gospel of Luke, Luke 24, He said that repentance and forgiveness of sin should be preached in His name among all nations, it's about forgiveness.

And so, John starts this discussion of spiritual maturity by the recognition that it's not a matter of your salvation, it's a matter of your sanctification. It's not about your justification, it's about your sanctification because all of you as the offspring of God, all of you as God's children have all your sins forgiven. And then he adds, "For His namesake." Not because you're worthy of it, not because you deserve it, not because you somehow merit it, but for His namesake. That simply means for His glory. It is to the glory of God that He forgave your sins. By the way, that's the reason for everything. That is absolutely the reason for everything. Everything God does He does for His glory, including all of His redemptive work. It is all for His glory.

Psalm 25:11, "For Thy namesake, O Lord, pardon my iniquity. Not for my sake, but for the sake of the glory of Your grace so that You can put Your glory on display." That is a prayer offered by a mature man, "For Thy namesake, O Lord," says the psalmist, "pardon my iniquity for it is great." And he is saying when You pardon my iniquity, as great as it is, it will be to the glory of Your grace that You are such a pardoning God.

In Psalm 75:9, a psalm of Asaph, "Do not remember the iniquities of our forefathers against us, let Thy compassions come quickly to meet us for we are brought very low. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name and deliver us and forgive our sins for Thy namesake." Put Your glory on display. Put your grace on display as a forgiving God. When you confess your sins before the Lord, that's how your prayer should go. "O Lord God, forgive my sins so that You may be glorified."

In Psalm 106 the Lord saved Israel, it says, the reason He saved them, for the sake of His name, that He might make His power known. That's why He rebuked the Red Sea and dried up and He led them through the deep as though it were a wilderness. God saves in order to put Himself on display, to put His glory and His grace on display. Psalm 109 verse 21, "But Thou, O God the Lord, deal kindly with me for Thy namesake, because Thy loving-kindness is good, deliver me for I am afflicted and needy, my heart is wounded within me, I'm passing like a shadow and it lengthens, I'm shaken off like the locust, my needs are weak from fasting, my flesh has grown lean without fatness. Help me, O Lord my God, save me according to Thy loving kindness and let them know that this is Thy hand, Thou, Lord, hast done it." That's the reason for everything. "Do it, Lord, do it in order that Your glory may be manifest."

This is exactly what is also in the heart of Jeremiah chapter 14 verse 7, "Although our iniquities testify against us, O Lord, act for Thy namesake. We have sinned against You, You the hope of Israel, save us in our time of distress. Save us for Your namesake."

Well you can go on and on with these kinds of passages. There are lots of places. I'll just give you one more, Isaiah 48, because this is such a rich one. Verse 9, "For the sake of My name I delay My wrath and for My praise I restrain it for you. For My own sake, for My own sake I will act," God says. It brings glory to God to forgive sinners. That's why in Romans 1 the Apostle Paul talks about missionaries being sent out, apostles, to bring about the obedience of faith among all Gentiles for His namesake, to bring Gentiles to obey the gospel so that God can be glorified.

We are forgiven not because we merit it. We are forgiven not because we earn it. We are forgiven not because there's something in us worth forgiving. We are forgiven because it gives testimony to the grace of God to do that. So, back to our text. John says, "I'm writing to you, all of you Christians, because you've all been forgiven not by anything you deserve or merit. You've been forgiven because it pleases God to put on display the wonder and glory of His grace." When it says "His namesake," name simply means all that He is. My name is, I am that I am, God says. God forgives us because it pleases Him to display the glory of His forgiveness.

So John is saying...Look, I'm not...I'm not questioning whether you're Christians. I know you're all children. I know you've all been forgiven. I know you don't feel worthy but it's been done so that God's glory can be displayed."

Now, he says, "You're all in the family but we have to realize there are degrees of maturity. So if you feel like you're way down at the beginning and you're a spiritual baby, don't think for a moment that you aren't a Christian. Just because you aren't where you should be in the spiritual process, don't deny the reality of what the Lord has done in your life for His namesake." And here John is saying,

we're not talking about absolute perfection, we're talking about direction, progress.
And that brings us to the three categories of spiritual growth in verses 13 and 14. "I'm writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I'm writing to you, young men, because you've overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. 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." Now in typical Johannine fashion, there's a lot of reputation there. I'm not in any position to tell you what John's motive was in repeating these things except the very obvious thing, to make the emphasis crystal clear. He is simply saying I want you to understand this so I'm going to repeat it, I'm going to say it and then I'm going to remind you of what I just said. This is for the sake of emphasis. He wants to embed this in their minds. And this is very encouraging. We're writing that you might have joy that's complete. We're writing that you might know you're saved. We're writing that you might affirm that you're a child of God with forgiven sin. But we also want to recognize that there are levels of spiritual growth. And he doesn't even tell them they need to progress along. He just acknowledges that that's a reality. It's not his purpose here to exhort them toward spiritual development, although that certainly is built into the fabric of what he says. It's simply to define the reality that though you're not a spiritual father, or even a spiritual young man, you're still a child who has been forgiven. So there is here a great measure of grace.
We need to look then at these three categories. We need to understand that there are spiritual babies. Job 32:9 says, "The abundant in years may not be wise." Just because you've been a Christian a long time doesn't mean you're not a baby. All spiritual babies don't become spiritual young men, they don't become spiritual fathers. They should but they don't. They should grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, 2 Peter 3:18. They should grow up into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. They should feed on the Word and grow by it, as Peter wrote. But not all do. And at any given point in time, even those who will grow are so new in the faith they haven't started to really develop yet. So there's...there's just the categories here with no implications other than that great implication that immaturity isn't equal to being unconverted.
Let's talk about these three levels of spiritual growth. And I think this should encourage us in our own progress. Let's start where you have to start with little children. At the end of verse 13 he says, "I've written to you, children, because you know the Father. I've written to you, children, because you know the Father." Now here he's not referring to the same children that he referred to in verse 12. Everybody's in verse 12. All believers who have been forgiven are in verse 12. We are all the children of God. As I said, I'm a child of my parents, I always will be in that generic general sense. Here he leaves the word teknia behind and he uses the word paidia. Paidia is a word that means a little child, someone still under parental instruction, paidia. The issue with a paidia is ignorance...it's ignorance. The defining element of spiritual immaturity, paidia, simply refers to a child who needs to be trained...he needs to be taught, who needs to be instructed. That's why instructors were called paidagogos, responsible for the instruction of little ones. And so he says, "I know some of you are ignorant children, you know the Father...you know the Father." That takes you back to verse 3, "By

this we know that we've come to know Him if we keep His commandments."
What is it that a spiritual child knows? The spiritual child knows God, the basic knowledge. In natural life the first thing that happens in a baby's life, relationally, is parental acknowledgment...dada, but first is usually mama. So is the case in the spiritual realm. The distinguishing act of a babe in Christ is to acknowledge God as Father, Christ as Lord. They express their delight in the attachment. They express their delight in the new life, in the joy of dependence. As in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6, the spiritual babe says, "Abba, Father," that's "Daddy." There is a...there is a newness of life, there is a wondrous familiarity, personal relationship with God. Little children are more regulated by their affections than their knowledge, isn't that true? They're more affected by their emotions, their feelings than by information.
I think about it like unconditional love. They don't analyze you. They just love you if you're their parent. They just love you. They delight in you. They find their security in you. They find their protection in you. They find their safety in you. They find their love in you. And that's how it is with spiritual babies. There's a certain thrill with the new life. There's a joy that God is my Father, Christ is my Savior, God is my protector, He cares for me, He meets my needs, He's provided a home for me. He's provided everything I need. There is affection for God. There is a delight in their spiritual life, delight in their spiritual experiences. There is a joy that their sins are forgiven. There is a...there is almost an exhilaration in the...in the expression of the Spirit of God that has awakened them to the realities of salvation blessing. That's where it all starts. It's not about information. It's not about theology. It's about relationship.
Spiritual babies are attached to the relationship more than to doctrine. That's why in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, which I read a little earlier to you, the apostle Paul says, "Look, here's how I know you are babies because one says I'm of Paul, another says I'm of Apollos," spiritual babies tend to attach to their heroes. They're more drawn, as I said, by their affections than by information. They are typical babies.
Ephesians 4:13 and 14 says another thing about spiritual babies that's serious. It says this, "Be no longer children...verse 14, Ephesians 4...tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine by the trickery of men, by craftiness and deceitful scheming." Now there's another thing about children. They are affectionate and they are drawn to relationships but they have no discernment. So you tell your kids, "Don't talk to strangers." They are easily deceived. They are easily beguiled. They'll tend to believe anything. When they're tiny they'll crawl around the floor and pick up anything and stick it in their mouth, that's the ultimate point at which everything is tested, the mouth. And you're scrambling around, "Get that out of his mouth." And that's where their sensibilities and sensitivities are so tender that they can begin to discover the world inside their mouths. And you have to protect them.
Even as they get a little older, if you gave them a choice between spinach and ice cream. Hands down, ice cream all day long. They don't have any discernment. They'll do themselves severe harm and damage. And they will be easily led astray. Think about all these sad little children who are led astray by these terrible pedophiles and then brought into this horrible situation where their lives are

taken and who knows what atrocities are performed because it is the nature of a child to be easily deceived and easily led astray. We applaud their unconditional love. We applaud the fact that they are attracted to people and relationships. We applaud the fact that they look at the world through rose-colored glasses and they have a certain happiness and joy that goes along with ignorance and lack of experience. But we decry the vulnerability of that, don't we? They lack wisdom. They lack discernment. They live in danger being led seriously astray.

Cults prey on spiritual babes. False teachers make careers out of spiritual babes. You look at these massive crowds that are draw by false teachers and you just know it's a combination of the spiritual immature and the unconverted.

Second category is young men...young men. And he says in the middle of verse 13, "I'm writing to you, young men, because you've overcome the evil one." And then he adds in verse 14, "I have written to you, young men, because you are strong and the Word of God abides in you and you've overcome the evil one."

Infants rejoice in the relationship they have with the Father. But this second level of spiritual growth is really important. This goes from the relationship to the knowledge, to the theology, let's say. This goes from the attachment that is emotional, the attachment that is a matter of affection to the doctrinal issue. And it's a beautiful analogy.

He says...I'm writing to you, young men, spiritual young men, because you have overcome the evil one. Very important statement...you've overcome the evil one. How did you do that? Verse 14, "Because you are strong." How did you get strong? "Because the Word of God abides in you and that's how you overcome the evil one."

What is the characteristic of a spiritual young man? Somebody who knows the Word of God. The Word of God abides in them. They know what the Bible teaches. They are equipped with spiritual knowledge. Characteristic of children is ignorance. The characteristic of young men is knowledge. They know doctrine. The Word of God abides in them. And as Proverbs 20:29 says, "The glory of a young man is his strength." A baby is self-absorbed with new feelings, needs, problems, everything is personal. A young man has outgrown that and looks to the world outside, looks to the truth. Young men, spiritually speaking, are Christians who have acquired knowledge of the truth. They're well established in the area of doctrine. As the spiritual food has gone in, spiritual strength has resulted. And you have, perfect tense, already in the past with continuing results, already conquered Satan. That's an amazing statement. Already conquered Satan.

Well what in the world does that mean? How could that be? Well, you just have to understand where Satan operates. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 13 to 15 it says, "Satan is disguised as an angel of...what?...of light." He's an angel of light. Satan isn't the one running around making people sin. People sin because of the flesh. Satan is involved in false religious systems. Ninety-nine point nine percent of Satan's activity is in false religion. He is a liar and a deceiver. He works in the false systems, the false ideologies of the world. Don't blame Satan for your sin. Don't blame Satan for what your flesh is doing. You don't sin because Satan gets after you, you sin because lust conceives in your heart, James 1:14. You sin because of the lust of the flesh, because you walk in the flesh. Read

Galatians 5:19 to 21, "The works of the flesh are these..." Leviticus 17:7, Psalm 106:36 and 37 say, "False religion is demonic." First Corinthians 10, "The Gentiles sacrifice to demons." Satan is disguised as an angel of light, that's what he does. Even in chapter 4 of 1 John we find that you can test the spirits whether they're from God by whether the spirit confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. "Every spirit that doesn't confess Jesus is not from God but the spirit of Antichrist." So Satan is that Antichrist. Satan is that one who proclaims lies. First Timothy 4 says that false religion is doctrines of demons...doctrines of demons.

And so, if you understand that you understand what a spiritual young man is and how a spiritual young man can overcome the evil one. How? Because if you know sound doctrine, you have overcome the evil one. And, you know, it's wonderful to see spiritual young men, people whose doctrine is sound. And you know you're a spiritual young man when the cults don't attract you, when false doctrine doesn't allure you, when you're not easily deceived. In fact, generally speaking, when you're a spiritual young man you get angry at it. You want to fight it. It's wonderful to see somebody arrive at that point in their spiritual development. They want to go battle the cults, straighten out the J.W.'s, correct the liberals. I have a little of that in me, passing through that stage. I'm not going to be led astray by false doctrine. I'm not going to be deceived. Why? Because I am strong in the Word, I know what the Word of God teaches. And in that sense Satan cannot deceive me. If Satan comes along and says, "Jesus is not God," I don't care how good his argument is, I don't buy it. If Satan comes along and says, "God is not a trinity," I don't care how good his argument is, I'm not going to buy it. I don't care how clever the hypocritical lie speaker, or the false prophet is, I don't buy it. If somebody comes along and says that Jesus was a sinner on the cross and went to hell for three days to suffer for His sin, I don't believe that. If somebody comes and says the Bible is not the inspired Word of God inerrant, I don't believe it, I don't care what kind of argument that person amasses, I'm not going to buy into that because I know what the Word of God teaches.

So babies delight in the experience of the relationship. Young men delight in the truth and the fact that they've reached t he point where they're no longer vulnerable to being led astray in false doctrine. They are still vulnerable to the flesh and to sin all their lifelong. That's why Paul can say, "O wretched man that I am." And at the very end of his life, "I'm the chief sinner." Because as you mature there's a decreasing frequency of sin but there's an increasing hatred of sin that makes less sin seem worse. But spiritual young men knowing doctrine haven't reached the final stage of spiritual development because he also adds "fathers," that's the third category. Verse 13, "I'm writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning." Verse 14, "I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning." You have progressed from strength to strength. You've gone from experiencing the relationship to knowing the doctrine to become a spiritual father.

What is that? "o know Him that is from the beginning." Who's that? The eternal God. Was the Bible written to give you information about God? Yes. What was the purpose of that information? Paul summed it up. Paul said this in Philippians 3, "That I may know Him." The third stage of spiritual development is when you don't just know the doctrine, you know the God who revealed the doctrine.

You've begun to plumb the depths of the character of God. This is when your life becomes an experience of worship. This is when it's not just warfare about the doctrine. This is when you understand what the hymn writer meant when he talked about being lost in wonder, love and praise. This is when you get to the point where your soul is exhilarated in the knowledge of God. It's not the parts anymore, it's the sum of the parts. And in some ways you're back to the relationship again only it's fuller and richer and fully informed by sound doctrine to know the author of that doctrine, to know the God who is behind it. It's to deeply, intimately know God.

This is the path you want to be on, folks. If you're just a baby and all you're doing is celebrating the relationship, that's wonderful. You're enjoying the experience of the unconditional love. But you are very vulnerable to false doctrine. You need to learn the Word of God so that you can become a spiritual young man protecting yourself from being led astray and blown about by every wind of doctrine and carried away by Satan's deceptions.

When you get to being a spiritual young man you will reach an exhilarating point in your spiritual experience. But it's nothing like getting to be a spiritual father where you don't just know the doctrine, you know the God who is behind it. It's not just that you understand the letter God gave you, it's that you understand the heart of the God who wrote the letter. There's a depth in that that cannot be explained, it can only be experienced.

And so, John says, "Look, because you're not fully matured doesn't mean you're not forgiven. I'm not writing this epistle to cause you to doubt your salvation, I'm writing this epistle to cause you to affirm it because even a spiritual baby believes in the true Christ, knows he's a sinner, wants to obey, loves other, hates the world. Even though it isn't perfection, it's direction."

Finally, the power for this progress, what is the power that moves us along? I've already said it. It's the Word of God. I mean, how can you be a spiritual young man? When you're strong in the Word. So there you go. You're not even going to be a spiritual young man if you're not strong in the Word. How you going to become a spiritual father? You're never going to know the God who wrote the Word until you know what He wrote. And as you go over it and over it and deeper and deeper into it, the character of God begins to develop and to grow and expand. You literally live your life in awe of the wonder of who God is. The Word is life itself. It is the living Word. The Word is life giving. We're begotten again and sanctified by the Word. The Word is life maturing, grow in grace and in the knowledge that the Word provides. The Word is transforming, "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." It is the bread of life by which we live and grow. And the pursuit of all of us is to become that spiritual father and the characteristic of that spiritual father is an intimate knowledge of God like the knowledge that Christ has of His own Father.

In John 17 that is just the really many call it the Holy of Holies of the Scripture. Jesus is praying to the Father and in this prayer Jesus prays for those who are His own. And His prayer is just so amazing...so amazing. He says, "I've given them Your Word...verse 14...I've given them Your Word, that's what they need. Sanctify them in the truth, Your Word is truth." And then He says, "My prayer is that they may all be one, even as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee that they also may be in us that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me and the glory which Thou has given Me I have

given to them that they may be one just as we are one. I in them, Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, didst love Me, even as Thou didst...didst love them even as Thou didst love Me." And then in verse 25, "O righteous Father, the world hasn't known You but I have known You." And then He says in essence, "And I've made Your name known to them."

In the end, Jesus is saying I want them to know You the way I know You. I don't want them just to have doctrine, I want them to have the intimate knowledge of You the way I know You. So if you wanted to pray an ultimate prayer, pray in your spiritual growth that God would bring you to the place where you would go from one level of glory to the next as you gaze at the image of Christ that you would literally get to the place where you know God in some measure the way Christ knows Him. As Christ truly knows Him to be who He is, may I as a believer come to the mature knowledge of God and whatever the limitations I have, may I know God as much as possible in the same way that Christ knows Him. That is to say, may I know Him accurately to be who He really is. And in that knowledge comes the essence of worship in my life.

Father, we can make that our prayer that we would know You, the One who is from the beginning, the eternal God manifest in Jesus Christ. Thank You for Your grace to us wherever we are on the road to spiritual maturity. Grow us up, make us spiritual young men, make us spiritual fathers who have reached the mature level so that we know You, the eternal One, in some way consistent with who You are. May we know You as Christ knows You. What privilege that is and may we be filled with wonder, love and praise. May we realize that that growth isn't going to happen by an event or a decision or an experience, it is the consistent ongoing work of the Word heard, believed and applied in our lives. To that end we pray that we might enjoy the fullness of spiritual blessing that comes to those who are strong in the Word, who know You, the eternal God. We pray in Your Son's name. Amen.

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