
TO KNOW AND GROW IN CHRIST

Part 8

1 John 2:12-14

*I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.*

*I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.*

*I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.*

*I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.*

*I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.*

*I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.*

Then we're going to jump to the gospel of Mark. Jesus is teaching here in Chapter 4, verses 26-29. He said,

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

Today, we are going to try to answer a single question: What does spiritual growth look like? Hopefully, we know what physical growth looks like, but we are talking about a vision that involves growing in Christ -- growing in your relationship with God, growing in your knowledge, growing in your obedience to God, and growing in helping others to grow. But what does it look like to make progress in those areas? What does it look like to grow spiritually?

We have here two passages that help us. The first is written by the Apostle John. He addresses fathers, young men, and children. He addresses three groups in the process of spiritual growth. Then in a similar manner, Jesus tells a parable

about the kingdom and he talks about the growth of the kingdom or the growth of a person in the kingdom of God, and he uses an agricultural illustration. He says, “First the blade, then the ear, and then the full fruit, ready for harvest.”

We are going to look at those three stages or phases of spiritual growth. John categorizes them as children, young men, fathers; Jesus -- the seed, the ear, and then the full grain. Before we jump in and look at those three phases, let me just talk to you for a minute and remind you that Jesus told us if we follow him, if we are Christians, we will be involved in the process of helping others to follow him. It’s just a part of who we are and a part of what we do.

Do you remember the very last thing he said to his disciples, recorded by the Apostle Matthew? Matthew 28: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” What’s interesting is that if you’ve had a chance to dig into your bible a little bit, you may have heard that verse. It’s called the Great Commission. Jesus is commissioning his followers to go and make more followers. We often forget that that’s the last thing he said, but the very first thing he said to those same apostles also carried that truth and communicated that value. Jesus met those first apostles and said, “Follow me and...” What? “I will make you fishers of men.” They were fishermen, but Jesus planted that idea in their minds right away. “You are going to follow me, but part of my plan is that you will be a blessing to other people.”

When we talk about spiritual growth and growing in Christ, it always includes helping others to grow. We really have two applications that we’re after today. One is: “I’m going to learn about spiritual growth and, for lack of a better word, “phases” in that development. And that’s going to help me grow. It’s going to give me a better understanding of what progress in the spiritual life looks like. But it’s also going to help me help other people, because I need appropriate expectations for the level of growth in the lives of others.”

Two observations as we get started, before I share about the three groups – a couple of general principles that we observe from the text. First of all, just consider what John is doing. In the book of 1 John, John is giving an overview of the Christian life. He is telling you what it looks like to be a Christian. He talks about loving other people. He talks about believing the truth. He talks about not being worldly. He lays out some pretty strong stuff, and right in the middle of it, just as he’s getting going, he stops, and these three verses appear. It appears to be a poem or a song that he has adapted for his use.

Here is what I think John is doing. I think if you’re reading 1 John and he’s telling you not to sin, to love people, to not fall in love with the things of the world, and that if you really belong to God, that’s what’s going to happen in your life, you might be overwhelmed. You might be thinking, “Wow. That does not look like me.” And he stops to say, “Let me remind you that you don’t get there overnight. There is a process of spiritual growth.”

That's really the first principle that jumps out in both passages -- that spiritual growth is gradual. It does not come in the form of a lightning bolt, typically. It's wonderful if God strikes you with a lightning bolt, as long as it's not one of judgment, right? That can happen. But we grow progressively, gradually, as we do physically. That's the first principle.

The second principle is this: It tells us something about the nature of spiritual life, that you can't create it. There's an organic quality to knowing God. God puts his life in you. So this is not me doing good in and of myself. When I become a Christian, the Spirit of God enters my life and I come alive spiritually. I begin to experience relationship with God and there's a transformation in my inner person that takes place. I can't do that. Only God can do that. And that is captured in both the agricultural metaphor and in John's lesson.

So let's look at the three phases. Are you ready?

I. Children.

Or what Jesus called "the blade." "I am writing to you, little children," John says, "because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake." Then later, "I write to you, children, because you know the Father." This is the basic truth where we begin with God. Our sins are forgiven by faith in Jesus Christ and we have a relationship with God as a result. That generally begins with a conviction of sin. You say, "What?" Yeah - what happens is, you can't experience the real joy of having your sin forgiven until you realize you have sinned.

Generally speaking, this is what that sequence looks like. You are going along in life and God begins to awaken your heart to who he is. You start to get a glimpse of who God is. He has made you and he has a purpose for your life. And there is going to come a day when you give an account for your life. You begin to see the magnificence of who God is, and the next thing that happens is, the Spirit of God begins to convict you. "Hey, I'm in trouble. I have sinned against a holy, perfect God." You can't open someone's eyes to see that, but every Christian comes to that realization in their own souls because the Spirit of God opens our eyes to see it.

Then, the magnificent truth that I can't pay for my sin -- the penalty for my sin is death, but Christ has paid it for me and I receive it as a gift. And when I receive that gift by faith in Christ, my sin is completely forgiven. My past, my present, my future sin is wiped clean because of what Jesus Christ has done for me. That's really good news, right? And it's not good news to you until you understand the need that's there. But when you begin to feel the need -- and let me just linger here for a moment -- sometimes your worst moments in life are your best moments. The moment where you really fail and you say, "Wow, I didn't even know I was capable of that," makes you confront your need for a savior. So sometimes our worst moments are our best moments because they bring us to Christ. They bring us to the solution.

Alright, just a couple of thoughts here before we move on to the second phase. Jesus said to Nicodemus in John Chapter 3 verse 3: “Unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” We become children of God when Christ comes in and gives us new life, when we are converted, when we are born again. You may or may not be aware of that moment when it happens. Many of you who are Christians can point to the moment when you were born again. For others, it happened over a process of time. You are not aware of the exact moment, but one day you woke up and said, “Wow, I’m a Christian. I believe and God has forgiven me. Jesus has paid for my sin and the Spirit of God lives in me.”

Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith.” It’s God’s grace. It’s God’s gift. You receive it by trusting in Christ. Paul continues in Ephesians 2:8: “This is not your own doing; it’s the gift of God, not a result of works, lest any person should boast.” So we understand we receive this as a gift. We are children. We delight now in our relationship with our Father.

A church that’s healthy has spiritual children, has new believers. And just like biological children, they bring joy. They bring chaos and they bring joy. You completely reorder your life when children show up. I remember the day our first child was born, who is now 24. He had this special gift to just take over a room -- this anointing to not be ignored. I remember when we came home from the hospital and we put him in the back seat. It’s like something clicked. Like, “Wow, he’s going home with us! We’ve got to take care of this baby!” And all of life changed. You know, you restructure your whole life. And as a church, we want to be that kind of community, where we welcome in new believers and experience the joy of them coming into a relationship with the Father. So that’s #1.

II. Young men.

John talks about young men. Jesus talks about the blade. The plant grows up. In Jesus’ analogy, the farmer goes to bed, gets up, goes to bed, gets up. He isn’t even aware anything is happening, and boom! The blade appears, the plant appears, and then the ear appears. There is growth taking place. John calls attention to this second phase as that of young men, and here is the emphasis. “I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”

The second phase of spiritual growth is often very discouraging in the beginning, because when you first become a Christian you are full of excitement. You are full of joy. Everything is new in God, and you are shocked when you find out, “Hey, I still struggle with sin. I still struggle with anger. I still struggle with lust. I still struggle with whatever those life issues are, and maybe it feels like I’ve got a few new ones to go along.” Really, the Holy Spirit is waking you up to spiritual truth, and the more you grow, the more you’re aware of your need and your sin. So, many times as we grow spiritually

(and John Newton called attention to this in his letters) we are tempted to get really disillusioned. The Christian at this point may even think, “Am I even saved? Am I even a Christian? I mean, I’m in a battle here!”

Let me say this, by the way, to our ladies. If this metaphor of children, young men, and fathers seems to not apply or offends you in any way, I just want to encourage you that the bible does this. We are all the bride of Christ, right? So if Adam and I can be brides, ladies, you can be fathers. Alright? It’s used as a metaphor for us and I think it certainly applies to men and women.

The picture is very helpful, though, of a young man learning to stand, learning to overcome, learning to conquer. The emphasis is on how we learn to overcome by the word of God. The text of 1 John 2 says the forgiveness comes for his namesake. It comes in Jesus’ name. It comes because of what Jesus has done. We are forgiven as a gift. But then this message and all of God’s word that surrounds this message of God’s forgiveness: We grow in the word of God so that faith increases and our relationships are transformed, our marriage is transformed, our parenting is transformed, our work, our career, our personal lives, our private lives -- everything is transformed as the word of God grows within us.

That’s a knowledge of how life works according to God. It’s a different set of values than what we may know or think of, but there are also specifics that apply to exactly what a Christian marriage should look like. We grow in the word of God. We get stronger.

It’s interesting, because as God blessed my wife and me with children, I realized I married a rock star of a mom. She was just so great with those kids. I was like: “You get in there, you change those diapers, you go.” And I served. Certainly, our home was not “men don’t change diapers,” but she was and is an amazing mom. She excelled, especially as the kids were younger. When they got older, I felt like the needs changed dramatically. Now there were adult conversations happening, and sometimes those weren’t good adult conversations. Like, “I want to go back to that stage where I can just put you over my knee.” Oh come on, don’t get upset.

There was this process as a father where you have to learn to tell your children as they become adults: “You have what it takes to make it in life. God has a purpose for you. You are going to overcome, but the biggest battle you face is right here. The enemy is within, and you will overcome by the word of God.”

Here’s what scripture tells us. Your heart is going to run after other gods. You won’t call them gods, but that’s what will happen. You will run after money, academic success, athletic fame, music, a girlfriend, sex, food – you will run after something and you will tell yourself, “This is the ultimate thing in life. If I have this, I have life.” And in that moment, that becomes a god to you. That’s an idol. But you have to grow in the word of God to understand that thing will rule your

life, until the grace of God comes in to displace it, for God to reign. Remember, we are saved by his grace, and that message of Jesus' victory over sin begins to take hold and manifest in our lives in various ways.

So, children, young men. You know, because the Lord gave us six wonderful children, they are all very different, and we remind ourselves when one goes through a phase where we are facing a particular challenge that, "Hey, we've been here before." This is a part of that phase physically where they are learning to be adults and we are trying to find out and wrestle through the tensions of how much to let go and how much to hold on. That's a helpful word picture for us as Christians in terms of helping others to overcome, but we need to not be surprised by the fact that there's a struggle and that sometimes there's a real mess. Amen?

III. Fathers.

The idea of the full grain here is that the person matures to where they are ready to be harvested. That's Jesus' metaphor. He's not saying you don't produce fruit until you reach this third stage. He goes, "No, as God's fruit, you don't mature until later in life, and really not until Jesus comes again." But we grow to a place where we become fathers, and fathers – what does the text say? – it says, "because you know him who is from the beginning." "I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning." He says that twice. The emphasis there is on the eternal nature of God, and that I am in relationship with the eternal God.

So now I am a father spiritually. (I'm not talking about me personally, but that's the image.) I've got experience. I've got wisdom. I'm taking responsibility for children. And the real key is: Through God's forgiveness, coming into relationship with the Father, growing in the word of God, now I've got intimacy with God. And there is wisdom and life experience that comes from that relationship with God where I am in a position to help other people more dramatically.

Let me just clear that last thought up, because it's very important. I don't want you all to get the impression, "Okay, I have to become a spiritual father in order to help other people." No. In fact, it's very interesting. Remember, Jesus called the disciples and from moment one he said, "You are going to be fishers of men"? Well, there's a moment in Matthew Chapter 16 where Peter comes to the understanding of who Jesus is. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They give all the theories of the day of what people thought about Jesus, then he looked right at his disciples and he asked them the most important question any person ever answers: Who is Jesus Christ? Peter jumps in and says, "You are the Christ. You are the Messiah. You are the One that all of history has been waiting for. You are the Son of God."

He has this revelation from God, and that's what Jesus tells him. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because this wasn't something you figured out, but God revealed it to you." Remember, the Holy Spirit comes in and awakens our hearts. So, he has this understanding of who Jesus is.

Now, the very next thing Jesus tells Baby Peter, a child brand-new in the Lord -- the very next thing is a bold prophecy: "Blessed are you, Peter. I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Here's the image. The whole idea of the gates of hell is that that represents eternal death. Jesus is saying, "I have conquered the power of death and hell, and you're going to walk in that authority as my Church." He is calling them right away. They are brand new in their spiritual understanding. In fact, they are still very confused, and he says, "You are going to build the Church." If you are a brand new Christian, your joy is something that you share with other people. You are there to bring others into a relationship with Christ, and you are starting to grow in your understanding of the word of God, abiding in the word of God. Are you with me?

I just want to clear up and make sure you don't have this understanding: "Okay, I've got to reach a level of astute maturity before I help other people." What's going to happen if we feel that way? We'll never do it, right? We'll never really feel like "I've got it together." In fact, the feeling that you've got it together means you probably don't have it together, okay? Newton said that one of the main characteristics of a father in the Lord is humility. That person comes to understand his or her dependence on Christ for all things, and that Christ is sufficient for all things.

I want to ask you this question: Are you growing in Christ? Are you progressing spiritually? Or are you stagnant?

We started off with two principles. Do you remember what they were? Spiritual growth is progressive. It's gradual. And there is an organic quality. You can't produce the life. God gives it. Let me add a third principle and that is: The word of God is central. You can't produce the growth, but your response to God's word is critical in terms of determining growth - how you Gather, Connect, Serve, and Grow; how you in this moment receive God's word and respond by faith; how you spend time in God's word on your own; how you connect to other Christians, applying God's word and sharing life; and how you serve and give out God's word.

If that's the case, let's try to answer this question: What are some of the causes for stagnation? If you're here today and you're saying, "You know what? I think I'm in a rut spiritually. I'm not growing." What are some of the causes?

1. The first cause is God.

Sometimes God ordains a season of dryness or a plateau in your life. Sometimes the only way to get to the oasis that God wants to take you to is through the desert, and he has ordained a trial. You feel like your prayer times are fruitless.

You're not close to God. You're not experiencing God. But sometimes God uses that to draw you to himself and to help you mature and grow. So the first explanation is God himself.

2. The second cause is that you've told God no.

You've stopped growing because you've told God no. You probably would never say no to God and you didn't realize in the moment that you were saying no to God, but there is some border in your life, some boundary, and you've said to God, "You can't cross over that boundary." It could be that God has called you to serve. It could be that God has given you a specific direction to open your life, to share it with others, and to connect. It could be financial. It could be a sin area. It could be unforgiveness in your life. But there is some area in your life where you have just said, "No, I'm still lord of this in my life," so God's just going to continue to come back to that area in your life. As a good Father, he's just going to keep coming back and keep coming back and keep coming back and deal with that.

This is very important. Listen very carefully because we only have a minute on this particular point. If a brother or sister or spouse were to try to point out an area where you are resisting God, the temptation is to immediately bring up all the areas where you are saying yes to God. But that's not the point. God is going to grow you and it is going to involve: "I'm uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable. I don't like this." And it's going to take faith. It's going to be right there. It's going to be clear. You can act like you don't see it. You can act like you don't hear it, but he's just so faithful to love us through that. So that could be it.

3. The third cause is a lack of nourishment in your life.

The word of God is not getting to you. It's not increasing in you. It could be that you're in a bad church where the word of God is not taught. It could be that you're not spending time in your own relationship with God. It could be that you're not connected relationally, where the word of God is being applied. But stagnation can come. I think that this is a tendency somewhat in our culture where we dumb down the word of God. We are drinking milk and we're not putting in the work of hearing messages that challenge us, and of studying and giving our lives in obedience and faith to the Lord, so we are malnourished.

4. Another cause of stagnation is self-righteousness or false religion.

We are trying to produce the life ourselves through our own good record, and it only comes by grace. Even though we are emphasizing, "Hey, here are four contexts: Gather, Connect, Serve Grow," here is what spiritual growth looks like. We are children. We are young men. We are fathers. We are progressing. Still, it's all God's grace. It's the work of God in our lives. We are cooperating. We are going hard after it. But we understand it's not our achievement. It's not our self-righteousness that produces the fruit.

Now, I need to close by saying this. We have people in this congregation of all ages and all types, and spiritually of all levels. Levels is not a good word, but I think it communicates what I'm after here. If Riverside is your church home, or the closest thing that you have to it, as the person responsible for leading the pastors and the elders of this church (I think I'm not out of place to represent the pastoral leadership), I want to say that we need you. We need you. We need you to see your life here as critical to the health of the body -- to engage and help others engage, to Gather, Connect, Serve, and Grow, and to say, "Alright, God, I don't know what that's going to look like in every area of my life, but I belong to you and I want to grow. I want to mature."

Listen, we know what it is. Every one of you can identify the 50-year-old man who is still playing video games and not taking responsibility for his children. Sorry about the shot toward video games, but you understand they're not evil in and of themselves. It's okay. Alright, if you're 50 you can play one hour a week. Surely you get the point, right? We have grown men acting like boys! That's not a pretty picture, is it? If you are here and you are 65, 75, 85, 95, 105, and you've been walking with the Lord a long time, we need fathers, we need mothers in the Lord to help us.

If you are a young man or a young woman spiritually, we need you. You have energy. You get in there. You change those diapers. You fight the fight, right? Amen. If you are brand new in the Lord, we need you. You bring a joy, the things of God. You renew all of that in our hearts, and that contagious excitement is like having a 2-year-old crawling around under the Christmas tree. Don't apologize for where you're at spiritually. Jesus said if you don't start like a child, you don't start. You can't start unless you just start that way.

Here's a last application I'll leave with you. If you say, "Hey, I'm brand new in the Lord. I want to grow." You know what? Find a father, find a mother, and be audacious. Say, "Help me," because they're probably not going to come and say, "Hey, why don't I help you?" That's what children do, right? They are just relentless in pursuing what they want. So I encourage you to pursue.

Alright, we're going to stop right here. I'm not going to ask the worship team to come up this morning, but I want to ask you to bow your heads and I want to end with this. If you're here and you're not a child of God, you're not a Christian, but God is opening your eyes and you're saying, "You know what? I see my need for Christ. I see my need for forgiveness and I want to come to Christ and ask him to forgive me. I believe that he paid the penalty on the cross for my sin." I want to encourage you to pray right now before we close out this service, just a simple prayer right there privately and say, "God, please forgive me of my sin. I'm admitting my sin to you. I acknowledge it openly and I ask you to forgive me. I believe that the penalty of my sin, the death that I deserve to die was paid by Jesus Christ in my place." Ask Jesus to save you. Ask him to come into your life. Ask him to give you his Holy Spirit. Ask for the Holy Spirit of God to come in and to make all things new. If you believe in your heart and ask him, he will do it.

Know and Grow in Christ – Part 8

1 John 2:12-14 | Sunday, February 19, 2017 | By Brian Brookins



Lord, I pray that you would meet those individuals who are calling out to you right now, trusting in you for the gift of salvation, in Jesus' name. Amen.