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## Gospel Grammar for Growing in Christ 1 John 2:12-14

Thank you for being here this morning as we continue our study of assurance of salvation from 1 John. The verses that we are going to study together this morning are in 1 John 2:12-14. The title for our lesson is gospel grammar for growing in Christ. Let's begin our time reading 1 John 2:12-14:

1 John 2:12-14

- 12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.
- 13 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.
- 14 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.

This morning's lesson may sound a little bit like a sermon. What's that? Years ago at a conference I was at a preacher stood up to preach and he announced that he would be giving a sermon. **He described it as a combination of a lecture and a sermon.**

I don't want that to scare you, but I do want to make an important point that you already know this morning - *Whenever we read our Bible's we really need to slow down and make sure we are understanding the verses the right way.* **We need to be like spiritual detectives who zoom in on every word in every verse to make sure we understand what it means.** That means understanding how words are being used in the context of the letter.

This past week I listened to a sermon from a pastor named Paul Twiss. Paul is from England. He preaches with a British accent which makes him sound smart. Preachers with an accent have an unfair advantage as we all know. Paul was talking recently in a sermon about the importance of grammar when it comes to understanding the Bible and understanding the gospel the right way. He made the following statement that I put into your notes to try and emphasize how

important grammar is when it comes to assurance of salvation, "**A correct understanding of grammar is the means by which you can live a full life in Christ Jesus.**"

That quote stopped me in my tracks. I would prefer to live a full life in Christ Jesus. Sounds better than an empty one, right? Pastor Paul said that grammar is the means by which we can live a full life in Christ Jesus. To reemphasize his point he came at it from another angle, "To misunderstand grammar is to shrivel as a Christian." Wow. That yanked on my spiritual chain a little bit. I don't know about you, that sounds pretty intimidating. **Especially for those of us who excelled at recess and not reading comprehension growing up.**

We've already talked in 1 John about the importance of the greek perfect tense. Do you remember that from a few weeks ago? The greek perfect tense describes something that happens at a point in time event with abiding results. Look in your Bible back at 1 John 2:3. The first part of the verse says, "And by this we know that we have come to know him." The second know is in the perfect tense. John is describing the difference it makes when a sinner meets the Savior. When a sinner meets the Savior their life changes. John explains the abiding results of coming to know Christ at the end of verse 3 down through verse 11. Christ changes us into people who love His Word and seek to do what it says and people who love one another as Jesus modeled for us.

*Initiation into Christ always leads to some form of imitation of Christ.*

Why is that important? Because John is not saying that the way to know that you know Christ is by doing certain things. It's not, "Obey in order to be accepted by God. It's obey because you are accepted by God." The greek perfect tense shows us that being born again, hearing the gospel and trusting in Christ is a point in time event with abiding results. Christ changes who Christ saves. As we abide in Him we go from a self centered life to a Scripture centered life and from a loving ourselves life to a loving one another life. 1 John 2:3-11 shows us the abiding results of coming to know Christ.

This morning I want to move a little deeper into verb usage in order to make sure we understand 1 John 2:12-14 the right way. This morning as we walk through 1 John 2:12-14 I want us to consider what is called an indicative verb. Did you know verbs can be moody? There are two moods of verbs I want to talk with you about. The two moods of verbs that are essential to flourishing in Christ are called indicative verbs and imperative verbs. What's the difference? Indicative

verbs are statements of facts. Imperative verbs are statements of command. Indicative verbs describe what is true for believers in Christ and imperative verbs describe what God commands us to do because of what is true for us in Christ.

Sinclair Ferguson explains it this way, **“God’s indicatives are always the basis for God’s imperatives. It’s because of who God is and what He has done for us in Christ that we should therefore respond in a certain way. What God does in His grace, the indicative, is the foundation for what we do in our response of faith and obedience, responding to His imperative.”**

Getting this order right is essential for flourishing in Christ. Why? **We all build our lives on a foundation and if the foundation is cracked it will be hard to live a consistent life for Christ.** We need a firm foundation to live for Christ and that firm foundation are indicative verbs that communicate gospel facts. Paul reminded the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 3:11, "For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

I remember years ago a pastor telling a group of pastors how to shepherd people well. He said, *“Never assume the gospel with people you serve and never exhort people to obey apart from the gospel.”* If you want to mature in Christ start with the gospel first and then apply it to whatever the problem is. Honestly, I don't believe that is how a lot of Christians think. We see something going on in our lives that is not right and we automatically think that we need to do something to change it rather than going back to the gospel and starting with our belief, we try and change our behavior without the belief. We leave the gospel behind in our attempt to address sin in our lives.

Sinclair Ferguson explains how lots of believers think that can be dangerous, **"It's common when people are convicted of their sin but still don't grasp the grammar of the gospel to respond with a new determination to do better, to try to turn over a new leaf, to start again, to try harder. Indeed, sometimes when a Christian explains the gospel to them, that's exactly how they respond. They're presented with indicatives: “We are sinners. Christ died for sinners.” But what they hear is: “You need to be better. You need to try harder. You need to be better. You need to try harder.”**

**Their understanding of the grammar of the gospel is so deformed that they hear the indicatives as though they were actually imperatives. The language of the gospel of the free grace of God in Jesus Christ is actually a foreign language to them. That's why it takes the ministry of the Holy Spirit**

to help people understand spiritual things. Only He can get the gospel to click in people's understanding.

**But here's something worth noting: sometimes, even when we've been born again and have come to faith in Christ, we can still lapse back into the old grammar again. We make our acceptance with the heavenly Father dependent on how we are doing spiritually or how we think we're doing spiritually: Did we have our quiet time? Did we do this? Have we stopped doing that? Now, these things are not unimportant in the Christian life, but as John Owen says, we mustn't confuse the foundation with the superstructure of the building.**"

Let me call a 20 second timeout on myself real quick. What am I starting this lesson attempting to communicate? **Verbs matter.** Moods of verbs matter. Why? Because they are the way God communicates with us. Words matter in the Bible. Authority is found in getting grammar right. So what? At the very least we should read our Bible's slower and more meditatively than we do. We should be like a spiritual detective who holds up every word in Scripture to make sure we really understand what's being said and whether or not the verse is telling us what's true of us in Christ or what God tells us to do because of what's true for us in Christ.

The New Testament authors start with the indicative, they start with gospel facts, and then they make connections between those gospel facts and how to live. We cannot get this order wrong and flourish in Christ because our Christian lives will be based on behavior modification and not genuine belief in Christ. Remember Jesus said in **John 15:5, "Apart from me, you can do nothing."** He's the vine and we're the branches and only as we abide in Him can we bear spiritual fruit that brings glory to God. We can't please God apart from Christ. That's why the New Testament starts with Christ in the gospels and then explains His person and work in the letters.

What we are going to see in this section of 1 John is that before John issues his first imperative command in 1 John 2:15 he slows down and he takes his pen and he reminds us of indicative verbs that help us understand what is already true for us in Christ. Next week I will be preaching in the two main services upstairs. My friend Brent Whitaker is going to teach on 1 John 2:15-17 in here. Brent is here this morning. I love Brent. We've become good friends since he moved back to Westfield with his family from Alabama and I am excited for you to get to learn from him. He will be teaching on 1 John 2:15-17 next week.

Before John commands us not to love the world, he walks us back through what's true of every believer in Christ. In 1 John 2:12-14 the apostle John slows down in this letter and takes pen in hand and walks us back through important gospel indicatives. Gospel facts we need to know and tell ourselves every day in order to do what God says when it comes to not loving the world. The indicatives empower the imperatives.

Notice what the apostle John slows down and writes in 1 John 2:12-14 in order to encourage discouraged Christians:

- 12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.
- 13 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.
- 14 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.

Here is what I want you to notice in 1 John 2:12-14. Are you ready? There are no commands in these three verses. Do you see anything in these three verses that are telling us what to do? No imperatives. **These are not do verses. These are done verses.** John describes gospel facts.

In these three verses John walks us through what is already true for little children, fathers, and young men. So, why does John take up his pen and write these things at this point in his letter? John has been writing some challenging truths about who really knows the Lord and who doesn't know the Lord. Very blunt. Very black and white. This is who knows Christ and this is who says they do but they don't.

As a parent, have you ever had to communicate something important to your child and you really wanted them to get it? Can you remember addressing a really important area of their life and then thinking - I really hope this is coming across the right way. Maybe this is why I say in so many of my lessons, "Are you with me?"

I think at this point in the letter John doesn't want these believers to get the wrong idea about their spiritual condition. He didn't write this letter to beat born

again believers down. He wrote this letter to build them up. This whole letter is meant to give genuine Christians certainty of their salvation.

What I see John doing in 1 John 2:12-14 is calling a family meeting to reassure the family of God of spiritual realities that are true for every Christian. He shows them in these verses what is already true for little children in the faith, young men in the faith and fathers in the faith. Did you hear that? What is already true. What is already true. Gospel facts using indicative verbs.

One of the major interpretive challenges to these verses is to think through who these little children, fathers and young men are. Are they three different groups of believers? That's how a lot of people understand these verses. They say that John is describing spiritual maturity and how we should go from being little children to young men to fathers. I think spiritual maturity is important to John, but I don't know if that is the main point of the verses. If that were the case it seems like he would have gone from little children in verse 12 to young men and then fathers, but he goes from little children to fathers and then young men.

I think it's more likely that little children is addressing every believer and then fathers is describing older people in the church and young men is describing younger people in the church. That being said, what is true for little children is also true for fathers and young men. If spiritual maturity is what John is after in these verses then I want you to see how spiritual maturity is connected to knowing what is true for little children, young men and fathers.

Let's walk through these verses under three headings:

1. What is true for little children in the faith (All Believers) - 1 John 2:12, 13
2. What is true for young men in the faith - 1 John 2:13-14
3. What is true for fathers in the faith - 1 John 2:13-14

What do little children in the faith know? 1 John 2:12, "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake." Little children know two things - They know that they are great sinners and that Christ is a greater Savior. Little children in the faith don't deny their sinfulness. We learned that back in chapter 1. **Little children don't deny how sinful they are, but they also don't deny what Christ has done for them.**

Why does John start the family meeting reminding little children their sins are forgiven for His names sake? Because forgiveness of sins is the entry point into

the Christian life. **There is no relationship with God apart from forgiveness.** Forgiveness of sins is first base in the Christian life. To be forgiven for His names sake means our sins are all completely forgiven based on who Jesus Christ is and what He did for us on the cross. Forgiveness means our sins are all gone because Jesus bore them all on the cross.

Paul reminded the believers in Colossae in Colossians 2:13-14 of this same truth, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

God took our list of sins past, present and future and nailed them to the cross. What does that mean? They're gone. All our sins are gone forever because Jesus paid for all of them on the cross. Praise God! Right?

What does God forgiving our sins lead to? Look at what else John writes about what little children know at the end of verse 13, "I write to you, children, because you know the Father." Know is in the perfect tense. When God forgives our sins He also becomes our Father. Forgiveness of all our sins and fellowship with God the Father both come through the faith in the finished work of Christ.

I was listening to a sermon this past week and the preacher said that every morning when we wake up, instead of reaching for our phones and checking our to do list for the day or getting on social media to make sure we don't miss anything, **we should start by telling ourselves gospel facts.** Start your day reminding yourself that all your sins are forgiven and you know God as your Father because of what Christ did for you on the cross.

I want to make a simple point here before we move to young men - **What little children know they never outgrow.** We should never graduate from the basics of the gospel. Life may be really hard for some of you but if your sins are all gone and you know God personally you have enough to rejoice in. Forgiveness of all our sins and fellowship with God on a daily basis are amazing spiritual realities that we should never move on from in our attempts to mature in Christ. At the end of his life, John Newton, who was mightily used of God, told a friend, **"Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior."** Newton stayed in awe of his salvation throughout the course of his Christian life. May we do the same.

1 John 2:12-13 show us what little children know:

2. What is true for young men in the faith - 1 John 2:13-14

John reminds young men in the faith in verses 13-14, who appear to be in the thick of the spiritual battle, "I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one" (Do you see that in the middle of verse 13) and at the end of verse 14, "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." Again, whether you are young or old, you all need to know this. You need to know gospel facts related to your new relationship to Satan and sin.

Prior to our salvation we were slaves to sin (Romans 6:17) and slaves to Satan (Ephesians 2:2). We did not have the power to free ourselves. What we could not do is what God did for us through the work of Christ. Christ, it says in 1 John 3:8, came to destroy the works of the devil. That means all who are in Christ are freed from the domain of darkness controlled by the devil. Have overcome the evil one is in the perfect sense describing a past action with abiding results.

What is John doing with these reminders? I think he is trying to build confidence in people who are in the thick of the spiritual battle. These people lived in and around Ephesus. They were surrounded by people who still lived under Satan's deception. People who loved the world and the sins of their society. These people were the minority when it came to trying to live different than the culture around them. They needed courage and confidence that they could live in the world without succumbing to the temptations around them.

**Curtis Vaughan, "Confidence of victory, a note found in all of John's writings, is here stated in the strongest possible language. Indeed, John asserts that victory has already been achieved by his readers, for "overcome" translates a perfect tense, denoting that they have conquered the evil one and remain victorious over him."**

Paul reminds believers in Colossae something similar again. What happened when God saved us as it relates to Satan? Colossians 1:13-14, "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Our deliverance from sin and Satan is real. We have a new King and belong to a new kingdom.



What else is true for young men in the faith? Verse 14 says, "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." Notice all the and's. This is true of you and this is true of you and this is true of you. Camp out in the and's with a cup of coffee and believe these gospel facts. These things are true right now for all who are in Christ whether we feel like it or not. Do you see yourself like this? I am strong in Christ. God's Word does abide in me. I have overcome the evil one.

What difference would this make in our daily lives if we really believed this? I think we would approach sin and temptation differently. We would wake up thinking, "I don't have to sin today." I can walk in freedom today. I can do what God says today. I can make progress today. I don't have to live like the unbelievers around me. I have all the power I need to live for Christ today and to do everything He tells me to do.

What does this mean practically? Because of what's true for young men in the faith no sin has to dominate our lives. I don't care if it's pornography or pigging

out on Twinkies every night before you go to bed. You know Twinkies are satanic, right? How could something that taste so good be so bad for you?

**What is true for young men is true for every believer in Christ.** You have to know these gospel facts to function the right way in this broken world that is under the power of the evil one. Right? You and I can't go out into this broken world and forget what is true of us in Christ.

What is true for little children? What do little children in the faith know? Our sins are all forgiven because of the work of Christ and we call God our Father. What's true for young men? Young men in the faith have a new relationship to Satan. He doesn't own us or control us anymore. And we are strong because the Word of God abides in us. Therefore, when we are tempted we know we don't have to give into it because of who we are and what we have.

### 3. What is true for fathers in the faith - 1 John 2:13-14

Notice what John writes to fathers in verse 13 and the beginning of verse 14, "I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning." "I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning." Him who is from the beginning connects back to Christ. Fathers are described by what they know. **Know in the context describes a relationship with Christ that has deepened over time.**

John is an example of this. He was the only apostle still alive when he wrote this letter. All the other apostles died for their loyalty to Christ. Only John is left. What is John still doing close to 60 years after he was with Christ personally? He is still seeking to know Christ and to make Him known. Knowing Christ never got old for old John.

I also see this modeled well in the apostle Paul's life. He met Christ on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. Years later, maybe 30 years after he met Christ on the road to Damascus, he wrote a letter to the believers in Philippi. He describes the goal of his life 30 years after he met Christ. Philippians 3:10-11, "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." 30 years or so after coming to know Christ what did Paul still want most for his life? I know Him, but I want to know Him more.

Do you see this in your life no matter if you are older or younger? I know Christ, but I want to know Him more. We will never know everything the Bible teaches us about Christ and what we do know we forget and need to be reminded.

Spiritual fathers reap what they sow from a lifetime of pursuing a closer relationship with Christ. Charles Spurgeon tells of a time when he was a young man preaching on the faithfulness of God. His aged grandfather loved to come and hear his grandson preach. After preaching on God's faithfulness his grandfather came forward and told the church, **"My grandson can tell you that, but I can bear witness to it. I have passed my three score years and ten, but still He has been faithful and true."**

This is the knowledge of which John was speaking—a knowledge which comes by walking with God through the varied experiences of life. Prayer, the study of the Word, devoted service, obedient living—these are for all of us avenues to this deeper knowledge.

This is a mark of maturity I think. Someone who is maturing like John describes a father in the faith uses every means of grace to mature in Christ. Whatever is available to help them know Christ better they want to be in the middle of it. It's not about checking boxes. It's about using means of grace to know Jesus better and better.

In 1 John 2:12-14 John uses indicative verbs in different tenses to describe what's true for little children in the faith and young men in the faith and fathers in

the faith. If you are in Christ, these gospel facts are true for you. The indicatives show us what God has already done for us in Christ. They lay the groundwork for what God commands us to do. This is why it's important to slow down in your Bible reading and be like a spiritual detective zooming in on every word to make sure you know if it's telling you what to do or what's true of you.

**Sinclair Ferguson, "It's always important for us as Christians to refresh our grasp of gospel grammar, to make sure that our lives are resting on the foundation of what God has done in the Lord Jesus. Because when that's true—when the mighty indicatives of God's grace in Christ are in place—then we know that there is in Christ all the grace and help we need to fulfill the all-embracing, all-demanding, life-transforming imperatives of the gospel."**