

Maturing Saints
1 John 2:12–14
April 9, 2017

Maturing in Christ doesn't always follow maturity in age. It should. At least as Christians age so should their spiritual maturity, not due to age itself but due to faithful attentiveness to growth. Yet lack of attention to growth in grace leave some hanging in spiritual childhood far longer than we might expect.

Every church should be a mixture of those new in the faith learning the practices of growth; those firmly in the spiritual conflict learning how to apply the gospel; and those who haven't arrived (who has!) but find immeasurable joy in the journey. Each helps the other, as our corporate life proves critical to sharpening one another along the way.

But when this balance of maturity gets out of sync, when those who should be at the point of immeasurable joy in the journey show regular signs of whining, complaining, and inconsistency, then the equilibrium of growth gets shaken. What should be examples of steadiness and joy for those younger in the faith and those struggling for consistency are missing, unsettling them in the process.

When those who should be firmly in the trenches of spiritual warfare toward living in the triumph of Christ can't get past matters of biblical authority, assurance of salvation, loving one another, and basic obedience, then the church's unity, worship, and ministry falter. Spiritual maturity—and lack of spiritual maturity—doesn't just affect the individual. It involves all of us. That's why John uses the images of little children, fathers, and young men *in the plural*. Christianity is not an individualistic sport!

We grow together. We struggle together. We experience joy together. We mature together. John shows us the process. *You belong to Christ so keep growing and maturing in Him*. What does maturing in Christ look like? Let's think about it together.

1. A starting point

Let's clear the air. There are no magic formulas for spiritual growth. Despite book titles referring to the secrets, keys that unlock the door, and hidden truths, John makes spiritual maturity quite clear. He does so at this point in his letter for a couple of reasons.

First, he has laid out two critical evidences of those who know the Lord, with more to come: obedience to God's commands (2:3–6) and loving one another (2:7–11). Any sensitive spirit will feel a twinge of struggle at both evidences. None of us fully obeys or completely loves others. That will happen one day but not on this side. Meanwhile, we evaluate our practice and find it lacking. So we need the encouragement and assurance found in the promises of the gospel.

Second, John hasn't finished laying out hard-to-handle declarations. The next paragraph discusses that one loving the world does not have the love of the Father in him (2:15–17). That tests everything that we see, hear, touch, and feel. So, again, we need to understand that we're still works in progress through spiritual maturity. We've not arrived regarding the world. John knows that we need the foundation of our Christian lives steadied by remembering that our forgiveness and standing with God rests in Christ alone.

That's why the identification of “**little children**” (*teknia*) in verse 12 and “**children**” (*paidia*) in verse 13 has more to do with all of us instead of just a few of us. In that sense,

we all start as little children that must never forget the basic foundation of the Christian life: *we're forgiven and accepted through Christ.*

(1) *We are forgiven.*

“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake.” Some truths we forget lead us down dangerous paths. Chief among them remains the forgiveness of our sins. If we think that we’re not forgiven, then we take one of three postures: [a] we fret, worry, and get spiritually paralyzed; [b] we ignore it, hoping that it will go away, while we slip and slide spiritually; or [c] even worse, we attempt to achieve or merit forgiveness through various actions on our part. None of these are acceptable for us. None mature us or help with the unity and strength of the body. So how do we deal with it?

Never get over forgiveness through Christ. Notice that John declares that we’re forgiven **“for His name’s sake”** or “on account of His name” (HCSB) or “through His name.” You didn’t earn your forgiveness. You didn’t follow a list of regulations and rituals by which God measured your sincerity and then granted forgiveness. *Jesus did it all.*

One’s **“name”** in the ancient world was more than the moniker by which he was called. It was his very being, the whole person. Or we might say, it represented who that person was and what he did.

When we’re forgiven “through His name,” then it means that the totality of our forgiveness rests upon who Jesus is and what Jesus did. That little phrase takes us back to the gospel. We need forgiveness because we’re sinners. We’re born sinners. We’re also sinners by practice and deed. Not a day passes that we don’t sin. We’re worse sinners than we even realize. God judges our sin. He has to because of who He is as a righteous God. He cannot let sin slide by or ignore it or fail to pursue its consequences that the Bible says is *death* (Rom 3:23).

But through Jesus’ name we’re forgiven. That is, through Jesus the Son of God that became a human being in the Incarnation we’re forgiven. But we’re not forgiven just because He entered into humanity. We’re forgiven by what He did. He took the judgment against us at the cross. He took every bit of it. He left nothing for us to do to earn forgiveness. Jesus paid it all.

And how do we know that He paid it all? We’ll celebrate it in a special way next week but we celebrate it everyday. By raising Jesus from the dead, God declared that He accepted the death of Jesus on our behalf. We’re forgiven through Christ.

The phrase **“have been forgiven,”** (perfect passive verb) means that at a point in time through the work of Christ, God forgave you, and nothing can change that. You were not partially forgiven if you follow everything without a hitch, but wholly forgiven by Him.

The first aspect of spiritual maturity is to never get away from that truth of your forgiveness through Christ. If you think, surely no one can forget that, then read John’s letter more carefully. Read Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Colossians. They remind us that despite good teaching, we sometimes have bad memories or we sometimes get sidetracked with bad doctrine or we sometimes get lazy in making good use of the means of grace given to keep forgiveness fresh on our minds. If the forgiveness of our sins as the foundation does not humble us, make us grateful, produce joy in us, motivate us, and give us reason for worship then nothing else will.

(2) *We are accepted.*

John's use of "**I am writing**" and "**I have written,**" are probably stylistic rather than shifting to different timeframes. It's his way of reinforcing what he writes. So he tells all of us, "**I have written to you, children, because you know the Father**" or "because you have come to know the Father." The idea of knowing means that at a point in time you came to know the Father—at conversion—and that knowledge of Him continues to sustain you.

Why does he point to "**the Father**"? Here's the reason: because we've been forgiven through Jesus Christ's faithful redemptive work at the cross and in the resurrection, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has accepted you. And He accepts you to the point of adopting you into His family. That's why John shortly writes, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, *that we would have been called children of God*; and such we are" (3:1). Imagine that! Sinners and rebels, but due to the work of Christ, are now called the Father's children! That's the assurance, despite your performance, because Jesus was faithful at the cross, you're accepted and adopted by the Father. Or as Paul wrote, "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" Consequently, that truth sustains us, so, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:15–16). The Spirit reminds us of that relationship.

That's foundational for everything in spiritual maturity: God has forgiven and accepted us. We can do nothing to add to the level of forgiveness or acceptance by what we do in our spiritual growth. That's settled "**for His name's sake.**"

2. Building blocks

"**Young men**" describes the next picture of maturing saints. It's not that one moves *beyond* the foundation of God's forgiveness and acceptance. Rather, now he/she builds on it and lives in it. The use of "**young men**" does not exclude ladies any more than his use of "**little children**" excludes all but early elementary age. John uses it metaphorically to refer to the robust, diligent, and wrestling stage of spiritual maturity. Even aside from the spiritual life, maturity can be a struggle. We all know grown men and women that have never really developed their minds, emotions, or relational skills. Maturity is a battle. Some seem to go AWOL when they should stay in the fight.

(1) *Living in the cross*

"**I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.**" The word "**overcome**" comes from the realm of battle, conflict, and contests. It pictures a struggle that ultimately results in victory and conquering [BDAG]. John's aim (by the use of the perfect tense) is to express some stage of spiritual development by which Christians start living in the victory of Jesus at the cross. I'm not speaking of some kind of mystical approach to the Christian life but rather that the Christian's daily challenges must be faced in light of the triumph of Jesus at the cross. The Christian life will be filled with conflict and battles. Learning to live in the cross becomes the point of conquering.

At the cross, Jesus conquered "**the evil one.**" He broke Satan's hold. From that point, all those in union with Jesus live in His triumph. Satan has no more claims on us. "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (3:8). "You are

from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” (4:4).

But that doesn’t mean that the devil does not try to make claims on us! That’s why as we mature in Christ, we keep going back to the victory of Jesus on our behalf at the cross. For that is where we conquer! We don’t resist the devil on the basis of our moral superiority or good manners or religious practice. We stand in Christ who conquered! We overcome by relying on the Overcomer. That’s precisely what Paul tells us when he describes the Christian’s armor. There he reiterates Jesus Christ’s triumph *for us*.

Here’s the middle range in spiritual maturity. We learn to live daily in the cross of Christ. We keep going back to our security in His death for us. We keep dying to our desires because He took us to the cross in Himself (Rom 6). We keep battling sin because Jesus rose from the dead after conquering sin’s power at the cross. We grow in our understanding of the power of the cross. We seek no other blessings or experiences for our spiritual lives unless they have a foundation in the cross—Jesus’ redemptive work.

(2) *Applying the Word.*

Yet struggles and time accompany learning how to apply the Word, particularly the gospel, to these conflicts. **“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.”** The Word **“abides”** or remains or is settled in your mind and heart. You grow as you learn to recall the work and promises of Christ. His commands keep us on track. His instructions refocus our attention to loving and serving one another.

John Bunyan pictures Christian facing Apollyon who tried to reclaim him as his own by taunting Christian and belittling his relationship to Christ. But Christian resisted Apollyon’s darts of temptation with the shield of faith and used the sword of the Spirit—the Word—to route him by recalling the promises of God. That’s the pattern for us, too.

We keep living in the cross as we learn to apply the gospel to the conflicts and challenges before us. That means giving attention to what Christ *did* and what He *promised* through His redemptive work. That’s the source of our strength to overcome. It’s not a formula but it’s a relationship with the Conqueror that conquers.

3. Maturing joy

The fathers are learning to live in the satisfaction and joy of knowing Christ. It’s not that they no longer think about God’s forgiveness and acceptance. Instead, they joyfully live in. It’s not that they no longer face the conflicts and battles as in earlier days of spiritual maturing. Instead, they’re more consistent in living in the cross and applying the Word to all of life. That leads to *maturing joy*. **“I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning.”** Then he repeats the same in verse 13. Two questions will help us consider what he means.

(1) *Who is this one who has been from the beginning?*

“What was from the beginning” opens this letter by pointing clearly at Christ. He’s the Christ that John heard, saw, looked at, and touched. He’s the real Christ—the eternal God who became a Man. He’s “the Word of life . . . the life . . . manifested . . . the eternal life.” Each indication of Christ sees Him as God and man, and focuses upon Him in His death and resurrection. Each sees Him propitiating the Father and reigning as King.

Here is the path to spiritual maturity. We can't get enough of Christ. We want to know Him more and more. We keep finding the deepest satisfaction with seeing Him in His glory and majesty; seeing Him doing the Father's will; seeing Him as the Way, the Truth, and the Life; seeing Him as the Good Shepherd; seeing Him as the Door and the Light of life; seeing Him as the Beloved of the Father; seeing Him as the Prophet, Priest, and King; seeing Him as the Lion and Lamb; seeing Him as the humble Servant; seeing Him as the reigning King.

If for one moment we think that we've arrived spiritually, take another look at Jesus. See Him who rode the donkey into Jerusalem, who agonizingly sweat drops of blood in the Garden, who was betrayed by a kiss, who was silent before His accusers, who felt the Roman scourging, who bore His cross to Golgotha, who bowed His head to declare at the cross, 'It is finished,' who was buried in a borrowed tomb, who rose from the dead, who ascended to the Father, who is seated at the Father's right hand, and who waits for the day of His return when He judges the living and the dead. See Him! Know Him!

(2) How does knowing Him affect us?

"You know Him" implies a knowledge that started at a point in time and continues unabated (perfect active verb). It's the satisfying joy of knowing Jesus. When that older Christian gets to the end of his life, he's not going to glory in his achievements for the kingdom or how much he gave for kingdom work or how he served others or what kind of accolades he received. But he's going to glory only in His King. Spiritual maturity leads us to the sustained, deepening enjoyment of relationship to Jesus Christ.

We're on the journey in maturity together. Some grapple with the reality of forgiveness and acceptance. Never get over that reality! Others feel themselves in the battle while learning to live in the cross. Still others keep getting more glimpses of the Lord Jesus that make them agree, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."