

Growing Up in Christ

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1 John 2:12-14

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Introduction:

One of the most amazing experiences of my life has been becoming a dad and watching my precious daughter grow and develop.

I know it's cliché to say this, but it truly feels like just yesterday that she was born and now she's already a 15-month-old toddler. Even in just these past 15 months, I've already seen her grow and change so much.

Before becoming a parent, I used to never understand why people would refer to their kids in months rather than years. I wasn't sure if they were trying to keep my math skills sharp or something, but now I get it.

Parents of young children do this because of the amount of changes that take place in such short periods of time!

From the moment you and I were born into this world, technically even from the moment of conception, we began to grow and develop.

So long as we were nourished and cared for, the amazing process of human development took place naturally in us. We gained weight, grew taller, learned motor skills like rolling, crawling, and walking, we learned how to talk, and so much more.

In like manner, from the moment that you and I were BORN AGAIN spiritually (regenerated), our spiritual development began. And this spiritual development is not to stop until our arrival in eternity.

In today's sermon, we'll focus on the spiritual development of the child of God and will seek to understand how we can effectively grow up in Christ.

We're going to see the apostle John specifically address his readers by the stage of spiritual development that they are in, and we'll see him exhort them all in some pretty amazing ways.

We might be tempted to think that John is classifying his readers by their physical ages, but as we dig into the text, we'll see that's not the case.

Whether you are a brand-new believer, relatively young in Christ, or a “seasoned saint”, God has something for you in His Word this day.

1. An Encouragement for All (vs 12)

*¹² I write to you, little children,
Because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake.*

Here in verse 12, John addresses all believers and offers a specific word of encouragement.

It may come as a surprise to you to hear me say all believers because we see John write to the “little children” both here and in verse 13. Aren’t the little children of verse 12 and verse 13 the same group of people that are in the same stage of spiritual development? Well, no.

This is where the Greek runs circles around the English language. The Greek word that is used for “little children” here in verse 12 is actually different than the one that is used in verse 13.

“little children” – TEKNION – a term of endearment that connotes a teacher-disciple relationship, indicating the care and nurturing one would have for their own child

Throughout his first and second epistle, John loved to use this word to refer to the saints that were at the other end of his letter; and these saints were so very precious to him. The reason why they were so precious to him was because they were so precious to God!

So, what is the encouragement that John had for the saints that would read his Holy Spirit-inspired epistle? The encouragement is actually a reminder: a reminder of what God has done for them.

And Church, what is it that our God has done for us? Well, many things for sure, but chiefly, HE’S FORGIVEN US OF OUR SINS!!!

This is what the Gospel is all about! And if you get tired of hearing about the Gospel, well, I can’t relate because the fact that our sins can be forgiven by God is truly the miracle of miracles!

To think that Almighty God came up with a plan for us to be redeemed and reconciled to Him is as good as it gets, church!

You know, usually when you wrong someone in some way, it’s on you as the offender to come up with the plan to reconcile with the one whom you’ve offended.

Illustration: why you might get her flowers and chocolates after an argument when you were totally in the wrong; or why you might make him his favorite dinner/dessert to make amends

Here's the thing though, when it came to the problem of our sin, there was no plan that we could craft for our reconciliation because no such plan of OURS would do!

GOD had to come up with the plan for our forgiveness, even though HE was the OFFENDED, not the offender. Only God could do a miracle as great as this!

“forgiven” – to be or become pardoned or exempt from legal or personal consequences for an offense

- This word is a very judicial term in its nature

You can think of forgiveness as when an offense has been undoubtedly committed and the accused is guilty as charged, but instead of being judged for their offense, they are released from the penalty that was due unto them.

Throughout the earthly ministry of Jesus, on more than one occasion, He declared the sins of certain sinners to be forgiven.

This is one of my favorite miracles of Jesus, because He gives this man the 2 for 1 special: two miracles are done by our Lord here!

Mark 2:1–12

¹ And again He entered Capernaum after *some* days, and it was heard that He was in the house. ² Immediately many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive *them*, not even near the door. And He preached the word to them. ³ Then they came to Him, bringing a paralytic who was carried by four *men*. ⁴ And when they could not come near Him because of the crowd, they uncovered the roof where He was. So when they had broken through, they let down the bed on which the paralytic was lying.

⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, **your sins are forgiven you.**”

⁶ And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, ⁷ “Why does this *Man* speak blasphemies like this? **Who can forgive sins but God alone?**”

⁸ But immediately, when Jesus perceived in His spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, He said to them, “Why do you reason about these things in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘*Your sins are forgiven you,*’ or to say, ‘*Arise, take up your bed and walk?*’ ¹⁰ **But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins**”—He said to the paralytic, ¹¹ “I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” ¹² Immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all, so that all were amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw *anything* like this!”

The bottom line is this: only Jesus, the Son of Man, has the authority and power to declare us forgiven! And it is only through His atoning sacrifice for our sins upon the cross that this is possible!

The manner in which Christ has forgiven us ought to make our jaws drop to the floor! If you are under the blood of Christ, not only has He forgiven you of all your past sins, but He's also forgiven you of your present and future sins too!

This is the essence of the great and wonderous doctrine of justification.

Romans 5:18

¹⁸ Therefore, as through one man's offense *judgment came* to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act *the free gift came* to all men, resulting in justification of life.

Romans 5:1

¹ Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

"justified" – to be declared righteous by God

- To be seen by God just-as-if-I'd-never sinned

"Justification refers not to a righteousness attained by or produced in an individual, but to the act of God by which the righteousness of Christ is credited to that person." – **James Montgomery Boice**

Paul describes the HOW of our justification in his second letter to the Corinthian church...

2 Corinthians 5:21

²¹ For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Praise God for the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to sinners who come to Him by faith!!!

When we sin after being made into new creations by Christ, we don't get undeclared righteous. NOPE! The forgiveness that Christ gives, our justification, is PERMANENT!

Though we do indeed still sin after being declared forgiven by Him, and while satan tries to accuse us before God, we have an Advocate.

1 John 2:1

¹ My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

"advocate" – one who acts as a spokesperson or representative on behalf of someone before a judge in a court of law

Essentially, while Satan may come along and recite our list of sins before God, Jesus steps in and says, "Father, that one's covered by my blood".

In John Bunyan's epic allegory of the Christian life, **The Pilgrim's Progress**, he writes of a conversation between Christian (who represents all children of God) and Apollyon (who is satan)...

Chr. When, O Apollyon, have I been unfaithful to Him?

Apol. You did faint at first setting out, when you were almost choked in the Gulf of Despond. You did attempt wrong ways to be rid of your burden, whereas you should have stayed till your Prince had taken it off. You did sinfully sleep and lose your choice things. You were almost persuaded to go back at the sight of the lions. And when you talked of your journey, and of what you had seen and heard, you were inwardly desiring of glory to yourself in all that you said or did.

Chr. All this is true, and much more which you have left out; **but the Prince whom I serve and honor is merciful and ready to forgive.** But besides, these infirmities possessed me in my own country; for there I sucked them in, and I have groaned under them, been sorry for them, and **have obtained pardon from my Prince.**

Then Apollyon broke out into a grievous rage.”

Here’s how the Bible puts it...

Romans 8:1

¹ *There is* therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

I know satan hates all of Scripture, but I’m convinced that he especially hates this one! If you’re in Christ, there’s no condemnation for you (no pronouncement of guilty) because you have been pronounced as FORGIVEN!!!

Before we move on to the next verse, I want to draw your attention to the reason that John gives as to WHY God has forgiven us, which is “**for His name’s sake**”.

What this means is that our forgiveness through Christ is all about God getting glory. In us being forgiven of our sin, God is immensely glorified.

Through forgiving lost sinners, God manifests His grace, mercy, love, power, wisdom, and so much more! And He is indeed brought glory through saving sinners.

Now before we jump into looking at the stages of spiritual development that John identifies in the next two verses, it is necessary to say that we’d be very foolish to only lean into the truth that pertains to the stage of spiritual development that we believe ourselves to be in.

I say that because, firstly, we may have a wrong assessment of where we’re at in our maturity in Christ (we ought to let Him be the one to reveal to us where we’re at), and secondly, because all of this is amazing stuff that will bless every child of God who has ears to hear!

2. To the Mature in Christ (vs 13a & 14a)

*¹³ I write to you, fathers,
Because you have known Him who is from the beginning.
¹⁴ I have written to you, fathers,
Because you have known Him who is from the beginning.*

Fathers represent those who are spiritually mature. These are they that have a decent amount of time passionately pursuing Jesus under their belt.

Here's the thing though, time and maturity in Christ are loosely connected. I don't think it's fair to say there's no connection at all, but there's not as much of a connection as we might be prone to think.

What do I mean by this? Well, it's possible to have been a Christian for many years and, as far as spiritual development goes, have little to show for it. Someone who's been a Christian for 30 years can still be a spiritual infant.

The same is true on the flipside: it's possible for someone to have only been a Christian for a few months but, because they are passionately pursuing Christ, they're on an accelerated route to maturity in Christ.

Illustration: some Christians are stuck in standstill bumper-to-bumper traffic on the 101, 91, 60, 57 (you pick), while others are on the Autobahn of spiritual development!

What we must know about spiritual maturity is that it is God's will for all of His saints! He has made this expressly clear in His Word. He wants us to be growing up in Christ every day!

Ephesians 4:13–15

¹³ till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, **to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;** ¹⁴ that we should **no longer be children**, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵ but, speaking the truth in love, may **grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ**

Until we are with Jesus in glory, God, through His Spirit, is working to make us more like CHRIST!

“**perfect**” – mature development, full grown, complete

Illustration: as a newborn grows into an infant, and then into a toddler, and then into a child, and then into an adolescent, and then into a full grown adult, SO GOD WANTS TO DEVELOP US BY HIS SPIRIT TO BE MORE LIKE HIS SON.

Romans 8:29

²⁹ For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

So then, how do we reach maturity in Christ? I want to share with you **5** very practical **ways** that you and I can ensure we are **growing up in Christ**:

1. Yielding to the Holy Spirit

As we just stated, it's the Holy Spirit's job to make you more like Christ. Our job is to simply obey the Spirit. To yield to the Spirit is to surrender and submit to Him.

Galatians 5:22–23

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

2. Running from sin

Sin will always obstruct the path to spiritual maturity. If you're wanting to be spiritually mature but are allowing sin in your life, you just won't get there. But if we're yielding to the Spirit, we will, by default, be far from sin.

Galatians 5:16

¹⁶ I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

3. Consuming the Word of God regularly

Just like how food is necessary for our physical growth and development, so the Word of God is needed for our spiritual development. **WE CAN'T GO WITHOUT IT!**

Matthew 4:4

⁴ But He answered and said, "It is written, '*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*'"

Job 23:12

¹² I have not departed from the commandment of His lips;
I have treasured the words of His mouth
More than my necessary *food*.

How many are stuck in spiritual immaturity because they are starving themselves from the Word of God, which is what their soul needs most.

4. Staying in communication with God

We have the glorious privilege of having direct access to God through **prayer**; and yet how often do we treat it as a last resort rather than our first response.

Prayer is not simply telling God what we need, it's being in communion and connection with Him!

1 Thessalonians 5:17

¹⁷ pray without ceasing,

5. Surrounding yourself with like-minded believers

It is so vital that you and I come together as brothers and sisters in Christ regularly. The reason for this is because, if we're doing what we're supposed to, you're to fire me up for Jesus and I'm to fire you up for Him!

Hebrews 10:24–25

²⁴ And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, ²⁵ not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

So, that may have felt like a bit of a detour from our text here in 1 John 2, but I promise it wasn't. It was necessary for us to understand God's heart for our spiritual growth and also how we are to actually mature in Christ.

Now, let's get back into looking at what John has to say to his readers that are spiritually mature (fathers).

John's encouragement for his spiritually mature readers is regarding their knowledge of "Him who is from the beginning". This is awesome.

"**known**" – GINOSKO – to come to know through experience

Illustration: It's one thing to read an article or look at a picture of Angel's Landing in Mt. Zion National Park, it's a whole nother thing to go hike it and stand on its peak

John is saying to the mature in Christ that they haven't simply known about God, they've actually known Him personally through a firsthand experience.

Application: Church, this is what we were made to do: we were made to know God in such a close and personal way.

Our knowledge of God is to be something we are proud about...

Jeremiah 9:23–24

²³ Thus says the Lord:

"Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom,
Let not the mighty *man* glory in his might,
Nor let the rich *man* glory in his riches;

²⁴ But let him who glories glory in this,
That he understands and knows Me,
 That I *am* the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth.
 For in these I delight,” says the Lord.

Knowing God is at the core of what our eternal life in Christ is all about!

John 17:3

³ And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

But who is this “Him who is from the beginning” that John is saying the spiritually mature know? Obviously, it is God, but not as obviously it is a reference to the eternal Son of God, Christ Jesus!

This is He whom John was referring to at the beginning of his epistle...

1 John 1:1–2

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—² the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—

This is He whom John was referring to at the beginning of his Gospel account...

John 1:1–3

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God.

³ All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

This is He whom John heard declare Himself in the book of Revelation to be...

Revelation 1:8

⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega, *the* Beginning and *the* End,” says the Lord, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

“*Beginning* was evidently a favorite concept of John’s. Thus he begins both his gospel and his epistle. This word takes us back to the beginning of time, to the moment when Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in omnipotent power and with omniscient genius flung the starts into space, when the angelic sons of God were there and shouted for joy (Job 38:7). What a sight it must have been! He created, with effortless ease, countless stars and their satellites into vast orbits. Stars and galaxies move at inconceivable velocities and with such precision that an eclipse or visit of a comet can be pinpointed with mathematical certainty. These galaxies that carpet the night sky with their splendor declare the glory and greatness of our God. And Jesus was there when it all began, an active partner in Creation’s wondrous work.” – **John Phillips**

Jesus was not created, He is ETERNAL. He is this “Him who is from the beginning”.

And so, the spiritually mature care about nothing more than knowing Christ more deeply and intimately day by day; and yet, they are in humble recognition that they’ve still got a long way to go...

Philippians 3:12–15

¹² Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. ¹³ Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ¹⁴ I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ Therefore let us, as many as are **mature**, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.

The mature in Christ join in with Paul the apostle and say, “I haven’t arrived yet, I can still be way closer to my Lord” and they make this pursuit the great ambition of their life.

The mature in Christ have deemed nothing else worth holding onto more than knowing Christ. For this reason, they’ve let go of the unnecessary things that keep them from knowing Jesus more deeply.

Hebrews 12:1

¹ Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

Now, let’s move on to the next stage of spiritual growth that John addresses...

3. To the Young in Christ (vs 13b & 14b)

*I write to you, young men,
Because you have overcome the wicked one.*

*I have written to you, young men,
Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you,
And you have overcome the wicked one.*

John’s next encouragement is to a group that is actively maturing in Christ and is in the trenches of battle. Here, John commends the young men in the Lord.

Generally speaking, the Greek word used here for “young men” applies to those around the age range of 20-40 years old.

Since we know that John is not considering their physical age but rather their spiritual maturity, this word is understood to be referencing those who are no longer spiritually immature, but aren't quite to be considered mature just yet.

This is a group that is very much on the journey of maturity in Christ, but they are under heavy attack from the wicked one.

We don't need to think long and hard to determine who the “wicked one” is... it's clearly a reference to satan, who is the great adversary of all children of God.

Illustration: I'm sure we've all heard the phrase “being set in your ways” used at some point in our lives. Maybe it's been used of you or maybe you've used it of someone else. Oftentimes it's used in reference to those who are older. When you get older, you naturally become a bit more set in your ways due to the experiences that you've had in your life.

Well, though it's usually used in a derogatory sense, sometimes being set in your ways is a good thing! The mature in Christ are, in a good way, set in their ways and uneasy to move.

The young in Christ are not as grounded and are a target of satan. Why? → because he knows that he'll have a much easier time moving them than he would a seasoned saint.

And yet, though they are under assault by the wicked one, the young in Christ that John had in mind were a force to be reckoned with! John encourages them for having overcome the wicked one!

“**overcome**” – to be victorious over an enemy in battle

Here's the thing about this overcoming/victory, it does not come from within but from without. The victory over satan comes from CHRIST JESUS who has crushed the head of the wicked serpent!

Romans 8:37

³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

In verse 14, John commends the young in Christ for their strength, but he also makes it clear where their strength comes from (the Word of God abiding in them).

The Word is a weapon that God desires His children to wield effectively! Satan trembles at the thought of a saint that knows how to swing the sword of the Spirit!

Hebrews 4:12

¹² For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Ephesians 6:17

¹⁷ And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God;

Jesus gave us a perfect example of how to wield the sword of the Spirit against the wicked one when he was tempted by satan in the wilderness. If you go read Matthew 4 and Luke 4, you'll see Jesus so masterfully use the Scriptures to combat satan's temptations and lies.

Psalms 119:11

¹¹ Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You.

Having Christ abiding in you is the ultimate victory over the wicked one, because this means your soul belongs to Jesus now and satan has lost his grip on you.

Having the word of God abiding in you produces victory when the tempter comes tempting.

4. To the Babes in Christ (vs 13c)

*I write to you, little children,
Because you have known the Father.*

Our final group of consideration today are the least mature of the three identified stages of spiritual development, yet this stage is where everyone starts: as babes in Christ.

No one came out of the womb as a full-grown adult. We all physically entered this world as babies. So, when we are born again spiritually, we start out as newborn babies.

"little children" – PAIDION – an infant, a child who was just recently born, an immature Christian

Now, though we usually use the word "immature" in a negative light, John is not speaking to this group in a negative way.

He's not referring to them as immature in a derogatory sense but instead is encouraging them and speaking to where they're presently at in Christ.

John encourages the spiritual infants that would read his letter by reminding them of an elementary truth that is still so profound: they've known the Father.

There is no doubt a lot of cross over between John's commendation that he has here for the spiritually immature and the one he gave to the spiritually mature (fathers). The crossover I'm referring to is that both groups are encouraged about knowing God.

I like this a lot. IT'S ALL ABOUT KNOWING GOD PERSONALLY IN RELATIONSHIP!

Earlier we saw how John encouraged the mature because they knew "Him who is from the beginning", which we learned was a reference to God the Son specifically; here John encourages the babes of Christ in how they know God the Father.

Knowing the Son and knowing the Father are one in the same. This is what Jesus taught...

John 14:7-10

⁷ "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him."

⁸ Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us."

⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own *authority*; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works.

Knowing the Father is knowing the Son. Knowing the Son is knowing the Father. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the Father.

Personally, I absolutely love the simple faith that John identifies in these spiritual infants. Simply put, they know their Father.

Illustration: I mentioned earlier about how I have a 15-month-old daughter. She's a smart girl and is learning a lot, but she's still so young so there's a ton that she doesn't know yet.

While she might not know much, one thing I can assure you that she does know is she knows who her "Dada" is. You could put me in a room full of other guys and I have no doubt that she'd be able to locate her dad.

Illustration: this is exactly what she did when she saw me across the room at In-N-Out the other night after I went to get us some ketchup. She screamed so loud "DADA!!!"

The same is true of these babes in Christ: they know their heavenly Father.

Application: Maybe you're a newer believer and are still kinda crawling in your faith or taking baby steps. You might not know much about words like justification, regeneration, sanctification, or eschatology; but, if you know your Father, you know what you need to know.

With that being said, no one is to be content to stay in their spiritual infancy. It is from this point that our spiritual development begins, but it is by no means to be where it ends. As we mentioned earlier, it is God's will to mature us in Christ and conform us to His likeness.

What a great tragedy it is when someone has been in Christ for so long and remains a spiritual infant by their neglect of the things of God. This is not at all what God wants.

Hebrews 6:1a

¹ Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection,

“**perfection**” – maturity, completion; “the full development of a Christian in knowledge, obedience, and beliefs”

If you're stuck in spiritual infancy today, I say this in the most loving way, it's time to grow up; it's time to move toward maturity in Christ.

1 Corinthians 13:11

¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

It's time to put away childish things and mature in Christ.

Conclusion:

And so, today, we have looked into so much. We considered the forgiveness we have as a result of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins; and what an amazing thought that is to continually meditate on.

We learned about God's heart to take us from babes in Christ to mature in Christ.

We've also learned how we get there. We will spiritually mature/progress as we yield to the Spirit, run from sin, consume the Word of God regularly, communicate with God regularly through prayer, and surround ourselves with people who push us closer to Jesus.

Wherever we might find ourselves in our journey of maturity, I pray that we would all be deeply committed to “Growing Up in Christ”.