

APOSTOLIC WISDOM FOR THE LONG JOURNEY OF LIFE

Sunday, December 31st, 2023, 10 a.m.

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IPAD TEXT - 1 John 2:12-14 - "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."

The Apostle John's first epistle is nothing if not honest. At least twice he has pointed out that many people live a *lie* in their Christianity. They walk in "*darkness*" - **"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth"(1:6).** - IPAD TEXT

Then, zeroing in even more specifically, John tells us the *first* thing that comes to his mind when he thinks of phoney faith - the *primary* way people walk in darkness while claiming to be in the light of fellowship with God - **"Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness"(2:9).** - IPAD TEXT

John writes so honestly because his love for these people is so deep. You have to really love people deeply to reach into their souls like John does in these tough, searching words.

That's where this wonderful text for our teaching comes in. There's a beautiful ***pastoral balance*** in these verses. John once again reminds them of the ***foundation*** under all of their Christian experience and the hope of all future growth and expectation. This doesn't undo the challenge of his earlier words. Far from it. What it ***does*** do is remind them of their ***capacity*** to genuinely and openly ***hear*** John's words, ***turn*** from their wicked ways, and ***respond*** with divine help as they continue to press their lives more fully and completely into the light - the revealing, purifying light of the risen Christ in their hearts.

But these Christians don't have to court spiritual darkness. There's a grace here. There's a life and power at work inside their skins. And loving, wise, and yes, old apostle John has wisdom and help for each stage of their walk with Christ.

1) FIRST HE SPEAKS TO THE CHILDREN IN CHRIST

IPAD TEXT - 1 John 2:12-13 - "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."

Like a good spiritual father, John starts with the *children* - "I am writing to you, *little children*, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake..... [13]....I write to you, *children*, because you know the father."

There is something so precious in these words. John sees a great need to talk about the only real way to start life in Jesus. Everyone must start at the *beginning*. You have to be rooted and settled on the issue of *forgiveness*. We will grow up spiritually deformed unless we have our birth in divine mercy. We won't think properly about anything else if this is skipped over lightly. There will be no *peace with God*, no *confidence in prayer*, no *ongoing joy* apart from entering the kingdom with high confidence in divine grace and forgiveness.

Grace is the **entry** point. The Christian is not someone trying to **earn** God's forgiveness. He is not someone **hoping** he will one day be forgiven or that he can somehow **qualify** for kingdom status. No. When John writes to these "**little children**" and talks about their **first experience in Christ** he lays the right foundation. Never forget your sins are forgiven! Don't carry suitcases full of past guilt out of the starting gate. Jesus brings unbelievable mercy. We have been "**righteoused**" (that's the literal meaning of the word "**justification**") through faith in Jesus Christ.

We constantly need living foundation of **new birth**. None of us ever **feels** worthy. But we still are forgiven. **Worthy** people don't need forgiveness. **Unworthy** people do. You will never be worthy. But you still are forgiven.

There's a wonderful, wise **balance** in John's pastoral heart. We can grow **careless**. We can also **lose sight of the magnificence and centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ - "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for His name's sake"(2:12). - IPAD TEXT**

You can't help but get the impression from the last part of that phrase it's all about Jesus, not me - "**....your sins are forgiven for His name's sake.**"

I can **hold orthodox beliefs** about the cross and still **lose sight** of the cross. Jesus calls the church specifically to **collect themselves** regularly, with nothing else on the agenda, to take the time to **relive the centrality of His crucifixion over and over again**. We call it **communion** because we're to all learn together the only reason we're here at all is the mercy extended through Christ's cross.

And every time we gather at His table I'm reminded not just of my **sinfulness**. That was never the heart or the call of Jesus. I'm reminded of the wonder of my **forgiveness**. I celebrate the completeness and wonder of being clean and free because of Jesus Christ.

And so as John writes to these **"young children"** he is saying there is only one way to be **propelled** in your life in Christ. Make sure you know you've truly **begun**. All children must be **born**. There is a definite **start**. And you can only be spiritually born at the children's mercy gate to the kingdom.

2) SECOND, HE SPEAKS TO MATURE FATHERS IN THE FAITH

IPAD TEXT - 1 John 2:13-14 - "I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.....[14]....I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning...."

This ***“walking in the light”*** John has been describing - our walk with God - is meant to ripen and deepen with the passing of time. This mind-set is hinted at in the way John words his instructions. In each of the three groups addressed by John, the wording changes slightly as it's repeated. Only in the case of the fathers is it repeated ***in exactly the same words*** - ***“because you have known him who is from the beginning”*** (13-14). John says it twice for emphasis.

The children have ***“come to know him”*** (13c). But the fathers ***“know him who is from the beginning.”*** What's the difference? When John addressed the fathers his emphasis is on a ***history with God***. He focuses on the ***passing of time***. The mature in Christ have learned, more than anything else, to ***constantly think of their present walk*** in the ***context of past lessons and mercies***.

As we stand here with our Bible open on the last Sunday of 2023 we are being called by this aged Apostle to remember there are great blessings in this approach. The mature don't make as many ***rash decisions***. They don't ***rush their opinions*** about life and the work of God. They don't ***panic with what is presently unexplainable***. They are less inclined to neat little slogans and pre-packaged ***spiritual slot machines***.

In short, they have gradually learned (because there's no other way to do it) to not just see the **present activity**, or apparent **inactivity** of God, but to look back and trace the **path of God**. They have learned not to judge God by isolated events.

IPAD TEXT - Psalm 90:1 - "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations."

Now that's a recorded prayer of Moses. When you consider it, it makes you wonder. One could certainly find many occasions in Israel's life when she didn't seem to even **know** God. There were also times when God looked like anything but a comfortable home for these wayward children:

The rest of that Psalm is hardly the stuff of praise choruses:

IPAD TEXT - Psalm 90:5-11 - "You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: [6] in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. [7] for we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. [8] you have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. [9] for all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. [10] the years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. [11] who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?"

What's going on with all this negative stuff? Moses learned to look at the **long sweep** of God's dealing with His people. He learned that God was **good** even when He didn't seem **gentle**. He learned God had a plan even when everything seemed to be spinning out of control.

When you're young - like **children** - you tend to see life **one event at a time**. And if you **isolate** the events of life - if you must have some simplistic, pat, packaged meaning for every single thing - and if you need every answer this instant - then you never will spiritually grow up. You will spend your whole childish life whining about God.

"All things work together for good" Yes, that's Biblically true. But not everything that happens is **good** taken all by itself. **Bad** things happen. Yet, the promise is God is so wise and so good and so powerful that He takes all the **isolated events** of my life and yours and **works them all together for our growth in Christ**. That's the mature outlook. The mature in Christ aren't shaken by every headline. Their beliefs aren't wiped out by the latest best-seller. There's an understanding of the big picture and plan of God.

Without ever using the term, I'm sure the Psalmist was describing the **mature** viewpoint when he spoke of the man who is **"....not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord"**(Psalm 112:7). -
IPAD TEXT

3) THIRD, JOHN SPEAKS TO THE YOUNG WHO FIGHT THE ENEMY

IPAD TEXT - 1 John 2:13-14 - "...I am writing to you, *young men, because you have overcome the evil one....[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.*"

There's such a beautiful and important balance here. The Christian life is not just enjoying forgiveness or even resting in the character of God. There are **battles** that must be fought. The deliverance from the **guilt of past sin** must lead to ongoing **deliverance from the power of present sin** as I resist the influence of the enemy on all fronts of my life.

How can I win those battles? Where does strength come from? **1**
John 2:14b - "...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." - IPAD TEXT

The Christian life isn't just **believing**. It isn't even just **knowing**. There is much to **resist** and much to **overcome**. Hear that phrase, **"...the word of God abides in you."** Some translations say **"the word of God lives in you."** That captures it brightly. It's not just that they've **read** the word. They don't just **know** it. They **use** it. It **lives** in them the way electricity **lives** in a glowing light bulb.

Perhaps the best way to explain those words is to look at their opposite: **1 John 1:10 - "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."** - IPAD TEXT

This is not **denying** God's word. And it's not even **neglecting to read** God's word. This is something different. This is what I **don't** do at a certain point when the word of God **disagrees** with my present view of things in my own heart. And what I **don't** do is make room for God's viewpoint. I cling to my own instead. The Word doesn't **abide** in me if the Word says I'm sinning and say, "No more than anyone else in the church."

John's point is simple. Strength comes from allowing the word to **live** - to **dominate** - to **rule** and **arbitrate** - my thoughts and motives. That's the inward battle field of my life. That's where the Devil must be **overcome** and my own inclinations must be **resisted**. "His word lives **in** you!"

John doesn't mean the children and the fathers don't have to resist self and overcome the Devil. Clearly, that's a big part of the Christian life for **everyone**. But John's particular emphasis (whether he's dealing with **chronological** age, or spiritual **maturity** makes no difference to his argument), his particular emphasis with this instruction is on the **"young men."** John says **young men and women** have particular need for attention to this instruction about **"overcoming"** all that opposes their growth in Christ.

And here, I think, is the reason. The young and the strong are those who are traditionally at their peak of power, influence and involvement in life. They are the ones most likely to feel pinched for time. They are fully engaged in the business of life. Demands crowd and compete for attention. In our day both young men and young women are just at that point in life where things begin to open up for them. They're just hitting their stride - making their mark - climbing to the top.

And at this point there's a passion in John's heart. He's now an old man. He's done with the rat race. He's one of the mature fathers in Christ. But he still has a sharp memory and years of experienced insight burning inside. He knows all about the dangers of the journey.

And if he were alive in our church today he'd tap every young business person - every upwardly mobile millennial just pulling out into the fast lane of life - all who are burning their candles at both ends - and he'd say, "Don't blow it at this point. Don't get sidetracked just when you need to stay the most focused. Some things are more important than you know right now. And deepening your walk with Jesus is one of them"

If I were able to do anything today I'd love to put my arm around the shoulder of all the relatively younger adults here - those who are **strong** in their approach to the challenges and demands of life. And I'd love to say that I know from my own experience I have almost no regrets that I wasn't more successful and affluent in this life.

You only **think** you will regret not having those things when you're still young and chasing after them. But I wish I'd given more of my life to Jesus. I wish somehow I could go back, start all over, and invest more of my time and effort into things eternal than things fluffy. Put your soul into things that will glow brighter and brighter with the passing of years. Don't chase things that will simply fade away and leave your heart empty in the end.

4) **THREE PARTICULAR DANGERS ON THE JOURNEY OF LIFE IN CHRIST**

Here are the **three dangers**. If I were summing all this up in a practical way I would hear John crystalizing his counsel to each group in this way:

- a) ***To those young in the faith - “children”*** - There can easily come the tendency to think the past may be too dark to ever be fully erased. We come to Jesus as we are, marred and bruised by ***divorce, abortion, homosexuality, or hatred***. We're all ***bound by habit***.

Of course, we never get anywhere renaming these sins or treating them lightly. And John knows that too. But he seems to urge that we ***do*** start out in our walk with high confidence in God's ability to give you a clean heart. Just stand strong in grace and learn to stay there.

- b) ***To those with many years of experience walking with Jesus - “fathers”*** - It is easy, after many years of experience in the faith, to think I'm at the end of my spiritual journey. After all, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. It can be easy to confuse being solid and grounded in God with just being set in your ways.

Remember, both John and Paul define mature people as those who keep stretching for the mark and reaching for what's ahead. Do mature. Don't settle. You have a much needed ministry to the "**children**" in the faith who may doubt God's grace to reach the stain of their past. And you will certainly need to offer direction to those "**young men**" (**and women**) all caught up in the battles and distractions of daily life.

- c) ***To the young and the strong - those brimming with the strength and the fullness of life's opportunities and challenges*** - It is so easy to forget where the real battles lie. You can easily squeeze God out. The biggest battles aren't in your company's head office. The most urgent battle is ***inside***. It's the battle to keep the word of God ***living*** in your heart every day.

There - that's this wise, old, divinely inspired Apostle's dying words to Christians serious about finding life's deepest joy in 2024.