

# Stages of Growth

1 JOHN 2:12-14

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From time to time, we know that families are able to get a picture that includes a number of generations – often three – grandparents, with their children, with their children; sometimes four, including great grandparents, and more rarely, five generations. On the wall up here, I've put a five-generation picture from our family, from my mom's side of the family. I am the one who isn't doing much more than drooling in this picture. So we have me as the youngest, my parents, my mom's father (in the upper left), his mother (in front of him (in the lower left)), and then her parents right there in front of me. So, there are five generations, and this picture is a cherished memory in our family.

But as we look at images like this, we see various stages in life. We see those who are older, those who have raised families of their own, and now they are most likely retired, perhaps they enjoy being with their children and grandchildren over the holidays; they are perhaps enjoying the fruits of many years of labor. These are those who are older, often with much life experience, much wisdom.

Then, there are those who are younger – not children themselves, but old enough to have children of their own; hardworking, earning a living, raising families, perhaps even caring for elderly parents or grandparents, busy providing the necessities of life. They now have the strength and energy that their own parents once had, and they are using those abilities to bring up the next generation.

And then there are the youngest, the children, the babies and toddlers, those who do not yet have any real responsibilities of their own. And as we look at these categories, we see a progression, GROWTH from one stage to the next. And we realize that growth is a natural part of this life. We all start out at the beginning, but we grow and mature, perhaps we come to have children of our own, and as we progress closer to the end of life, our role changes again as we have learned so much in life and continue working on passing along some of that wisdom to the next generation.

As we look at these stages of growth, perhaps we realize that we find similar stages of growth within the Christian faith. This morning, we return to the book of 1 John as John has some special words of encouragement to all of us as we pass through these various stages of growth.

Some of you might notice in your copy of the Bible that these verses are set apart almost like poetry, and the reason is: There is some structure in these comments, some repetition, repetition for the sake of emphasis, and the repetition is structured around three stages of growth: children, young men, and fathers. And I hesitate to refer to these as “levels,” because this is not some kind of ranking system; this isn’t like the Gnostics (the false teachers of that time) who were saying that they were better because they knew more than everybody else; but instead, these are STAGES, and like each generation in a family picture, each stage is OKAY.

There is nothing wrong with being a grandparent, a parent, or a child. In the same way, John has some special words of encouragement for Christians in each phase or stage of the Christian life – for those who are newborns, for those who are young and strong, and for those he will describe as **“fathers.”** And to be clear: He is not talking about literal babies, young men, and fathers, he is not talking about gender specifically (mothers vs. fathers, young men vs. young women), he is not talking about how long different people have been alive (we may have some elderly in the children category and some who are younger in the father category – this is not about age), but he is bringing some encouragement to all of us as we grow spiritually and as we go through the various stages of the Christian life. Notice, please, 1 John 2:12-14,

***12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake. 13 I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. 14 I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. 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.***

On this New Year’s Day, I am assuming that those of us who are here are here because we really want to grow in our Christian faith. Regardless of where we are on this journey, we want to learn something now that we didn’t know before, we want to be closer to God this year than we were last year, we want to be more obedient to God this week than we have been in the past. This is why we are here. And so for the next few moments, I want us to let this passage sink in as John encourages us in whatever stage of Christian living we are in.

All of us grow. Even as adults, we grow! We might think that once we grow up, we stop growing, but that is not true. I have read that every hour something like 200 billion of our cells die and are replaced. Every ten years, our bones are completely regenerated. I have read that in our lifetime, we will shed 40 pounds of skin – 40 pounds of skin! I have also read that a majority of the dust we have in our homes is actually skin, those dead skin cells that die and fall off and land on every surface in our homes. So, we grow physically, and the same thing is also true spiritually – we grow.

- I. **This morning, then, let us look at these stages outlined for us here, and we start with those who are described by John as being “CHILDREN.”**

In verse 12, he uses the normal word for **“offspring,”** but it’s modified (as explained in English) with the word **“little.”** They are **“children,”** but they are the **“little”** kind of children. Then, down toward the end of verse 13, he uses a different word for **“children,”** and the word refers to a young child, to the kind of children who are still at home under the care of their parents. So we’re getting a picture here, and the emphasis seems to be

that nobody enters the Christian faith fully mature. We do not start out as full-grown and fully-mature Christians, but we grow over time.

Remember: We've had some heavy lessons so far in this book – the fact that if we say we don't sin we are lying, and so on. The way I see it, then, John is coming in here with some encouragement. He realizes that some people reading this book are very new at this, he doesn't want them to get discouraged, so he starts out by addressing those who are spiritually immature. And to these people, to those who are new in the faith, John has two messages. The first message is: Your sins have been forgiven. So, he gives them a reminder: Yes, you have sinned, but remember: Those sins have been forgiven. Do not get overwhelmed with the challenge. You are not chained to the past. You are free. You no longer stand condemned before God. Those sins from the past have been completely washed away.

But, there's more! Not only have these new Christians been forgiven, but we also find (in verse 13), a second encouraging statement as John says, ***"You know the Father."*** And to me, the idea is: Even though you've only been a Christian a short time, you have the same relationship with God that everybody else has. You know God! And no matter how dysfunctional our lives might have been before, knowing God as our Father brings some sense of security, a sense of calm. We are accepted by God.

So, this is the first stage in our Christian journey – all of us go through it – there's nothing wrong with being at this point. As we grow, though, we need to progress past this. So how do we know where we are? How do we know whether we are still children? One factor to consider here is whether we are teaching others. Are we teaching a Bible class? Are we teaching any friends or neighbors? Have we brought others into the Christian faith? Are we teachers? And I use this as a criteria, because God does. In the book of Hebrews, the author makes the point that there needs to be a progression. This is Hebrews 5:12-14,

***<sup>12</sup> For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. <sup>13</sup> For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. <sup>14</sup> But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.***

And then he says, ***"Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity..."*** So, there's no problem being an infant, but we cannot stay there. A time comes when we ***"ought to be teachers."*** A time comes when we need to progress from milk to solid food. As Peter says in 1 Peter 2:2, ***"...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation."*** So, there is to be growth, and we grow by reading the word of God. I would encourage everybody to consider some kind of daily Bible reading plan this year. We have one in the entryway, a plan to read the entire Bible in a year (about three chapters a day). Or, you can read one chapter of the New Testament every day to finish the New Testament in about a year. Or, there are many other plans available online. We grow by reading. And we demonstrate that growth by teaching. So, if you are not currently teaching somebody, resolve this year to change that, to progress beyond this first stage of being a child.

## **II. For the second stage in spiritual growth, we go back to our text, and we find John describing the next group as "YOUNG MEN."**

And again, this is not a gender issue (it's not young men as opposed to young women), but the emphasis here is on the stage of life. The ***"young men"*** in this picture represent those who are ***"strong,"*** those who have

**“overcome the evil one.”** When John uses this word translated into English as **“overcome,”** he uses a word that Conner and Drew are very familiar with. The word is NIKE! Nike, of course, is the Greek word for “victory.” And so, you two need to know that this word on your shoes and on your clothing is also in the Bible! Literally, I suppose, the young men in verse have “niked,” they have **“overcome the evil one.”** They have come out on top, they have dominated over Satan. And what that means is that they have conquered sin in some sense – not that those in this category are sinless, but they are winning the battle. They are not overwhelmed by sin; instead, they are the ones doing the overwhelming. And like a football or basketball game, it’s not that the other team never scores, but we have dominated. We want to be on top at the end. That is what John is saying here. These young men have put Satan in his place.

And we find the reason for their strength toward the end of verse 14 as John addresses them directly and says, **“...because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you.”** And so we are starting to see a pattern here – immature Christians get stronger by reading the word of God, and strong Christians who have overcome Satan get that way because the word of God abides in them. They are so familiar with God’s word that it is in their hearts and minds. They know what it says, and they obey it almost automatically. Years ago, I remember hearing that one of those church fathers supposedly used to say, “Love God and do as you please.” And at first I thought, “That’s not right!” But then I realized: If I truly love God, then what pleases God will also please me, and so it is very accurate to say, “Love God and do as you please.” When we truly love God, we know what he wants us to do, and we do it; and often, we are able to do it without even thinking about it. We just know and we do.

I think of those first few times driving in drivers ed. As I remember it, the teacher said that we need to check our mirrors every 13 seconds. And I thought, “That’s impossible!” Here I am driving, and I’m just trying not to die! How am I supposed to remember to look in the mirrors every thirteen seconds? But then I got more comfortable with driving, and checking the mirrors became almost natural. In the same way, when the car starts skidding down the street in the snow and you’re going backwards, you’re not pulling out the drivers ed manual to try to figure out what to do, because you already know what to do. And I think that’s what John is saying here. The **“strong”** in Christ are those who know the word of God and do it. **“The word of God abides in you,”** he says.

These, then, are those in the prime of their spiritual lives – full of strength, full of enthusiasm, spiritually mature enough to know the right thing to do, but still young enough to still have the energy to do it! These are the spiritually strong who are hiking up that narrow and difficult path to heaven, and they are making good progress. These are perhaps the Bible class teachers, the servants of the church, the ones who get things done.

And like infancy, this stage is a great stage in the Christian life – it’s exciting, there is growth taking place – however, this growth really does need to continue even beyond this.

### III. As John continues in this passage, we find that he goes on to describe others as **“FATHERS.”**

And again, he’s not talking about males who have fathered children, but he is using this description to picture a stage of Christian development. There is a time when hopefully we can be described as **“fathers,”** in a sense. I would suggest that just as a father has children, so also someone who has grown to this stage will have spiritual children, in a sense. Fathers are those who have reproduced! We think of how Paul referred to Timothy as his **“true child in the faith.”**

And with good fathers, at least, there is some level of maturity. Some fathers are obviously more mature than others, but fathers teach, fathers provide, fathers give encouragement, fathers sacrifice their time for the sake of their children, fathers spend time praying for their families. To me, Marge Holden comes to mind. Some of you knew Marge. She lived on the far west side of Madison, on Mineral Point Road, about a mile out past the Target at Junction Road and the Beltline. We would pick her up for worship each week and take her out for breakfast with us. We considered her our adopted grandmother. I was living 600 miles away from my own grandparents at that time, so we just considered her our grandmother. We would help around the house here and there, and we just got along. But several times, she would grab my hand as I dropped her off, and she would say, "You know, I pray for you by name every day." If you wanted something prayed about, you took it to Marge. In my mind, that's what John has in mind here. Those at this level of maturity know God, he says.

In fact, he says it twice in these verses – he was writing to the fathers, ***"because you know Him who has been from the beginning."*** Spiritual fathers are those who know God. They have a deep abiding confidence in God, a relationship. They understand who God is. They know him by their own experience. And this is the height of spiritual maturity, to truly know God who has been from the beginning.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I'd like for us to try to figure out where we are in this process. And remember: These stages are not necessarily age related. So regardless of how old we are physically, we need to ask: Are we children who are just doing good to know we've been forgiven, are we the strong young men who get things done, or are we the fathers in this picture, those who have spiritual children of their own, those who truly know God? And no matter where we are in this picture, it seems that we can learn something from others at each stage.

But what's even more important than where we are is where we are going. Remember: Growth is a process. So it's most important that we don't get stuck where we are, but that we move forward, that we learn, and that we grow. If I'm a CHILD, that's okay – it is good to simply know that my sins have been forgiven, but there is more to the Christian life than that. I need to be moving from one stage to the next.

I look at this picture up here, and I realize that all of my grandparents, great-grandparents, and my great, great-grandparents have all gone on to their reward. But what we need to realize is that the rest of us are very quickly heading in that same direction.

This morning, then, we would invite you to make a decision remembering that this life is incredibly brief. There is a time coming when each one of us will give an account of our lives to God. The question is: Will we have Jesus to stand by us? Will our sins be covered by his blood? He died in our place, he was buried, and he came back from the dead. We respond to that sacrifice through repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, we hope you will ask, but if you are ready to obey the gospel this morning, we can help with that, and we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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