

Spiritual Growth

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[0:00] So believe it or not, it's been over three months since we looked at 1 John on Wednesday night.

Last time we looked at it was the week after we had to cancel because all the snow was on the ground. Now we're in the middle of summer, so because we've been away from 1 John for a while, we're going to do some review to set the stage for the new material that we're going to cover. And this review will sound familiar to those of you who are using the Explore the Bible Quarterly in Sunday School because some of the verses we'll cover tonight were the very same verses you covered last Sunday.

But remember when we looked at the book of 1 John and started in the very first section, we talked about John's purposes for writing the book first, and one of those purposes is in 1 John 5.13. And that's the verse that says, These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

[1:06] And then in 1 John 1.4, John included another purpose, and that's where John says, And these things we write to you, that your joy may be full. So John wants us to know that we have eternal life, and he wants us to have full joy.

And to accomplish these purposes, remember he began with a series of tests. And the first test is in 1 John 1.13, and that covered whether we have a correct view about Jesus.

So if you're filling in the blanks, having a correct view about Jesus is the first blank. And in John's day, as in ours, false teachings about Christ were common, and some false teachers said that Jesus was God, but not man, and others said that Jesus was man, but not God.

And both sets of teachings tried to discredit Jesus' work and diminish what he did on the cross. But the first four verses clearly show us that Jesus was both God and man, and John, who was an eyewitness of Jesus, reminded us of his own definite testimony.

And John also reminded us of the divine fellowship that all believers have with God and Jesus. And then the second test looked at the significance of sin. And that test is in 1 John 1.5-2.2.

[2:17] So again, that test looked at the significance of sin. And continual confession of sin is an indication of genuine salvation. And while the false teachers would not admit their sin, the genuine Christian admits it and forsakes it.

Remember that the term confess means to say the same thing about sin as God does, and so that's to acknowledge God's perspective on the sin. Fortunately for us, this section includes 1 John 1.9, which of course says, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

And rather than focusing on confessing every single sin, John especially has in mind a settled recognition and acknowledgement that we are sinners in need of cleansing and forgiveness. We also spent some time talking about how the original text of verse 9 proves that when we confess the sins we know about, God also will cleanse us from the sins about which we're unaware.

And that's because the Greek text in verse 9 likes the second hour in our sins. And so literally the text says, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us these sins.

So we can paraphrase it as, If we confess our sins, he will forgive us the sins we confess. And moreover, he will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And the third text, which John covered in 1 John 2.3-6, reminds us about the significance of obedience.

[3:47] So significance of obedience is that one. And those who obey God's word give evidence that they're genuine believers. So obedience then is another way to tell whether our faith is real.

In 1 John 2.3, he said, Now by this we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. So instead of patterning our lives after Jesus because they have to, true believers pattern their lives after Jesus because they want to.

So the Christian, as a child of God, ought to obey God because of a sincere desire to do so. And it should be a joy to follow in the steps of one who died for us. And then the fourth text looked at the significance of love.

So again, that's the significance of love. And that's in 1 John 2.7-11. So let's read all of those verses again because they're the verses right before what we'll cover tonight.

And 1 John 2.7-11 says, Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning.

[4:55] Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in darkness until now.

He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

So John says that the commandment is both old and new, and it can be characterized as old or from the beginning because it has its roots in the law, and because the love command was an integral part of the exhortation given to believers at the start of their Christian life.

But it can be old and new at the same time because the commandment is new, because it's new in the sense of how Jesus established and demonstrated it through his death and resurrection.

So Jesus in his obedience fulfilled the whole law, and he gave it a depth of meaning that it had never had before. Listen to what Jesus said in John 13, 34, and 35.

[6:01] Jesus said, A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

So Jesus gave the command to love a new standard because Moses had said, Love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said the new standard is to love your neighbor as Jesus has loved us.

So that's taking it to an entirely different level. And then finally the command is new because for those who believe, it makes possible a new and eternal life in which they're motivated by the grace of God to have that self-sacrificing Christ-like love.

In other words, we can't have the self-sacrificing Christ-like love unless the Holy Spirit enables us to do that because that's not natural for people. So we can sum up the command to love like this.

It's new because of how Jesus is elevated, because of how Jesus has demonstrated it, and because of how Jesus has enabled such love in us. So notice the progression that we had in chapter 2 because in 2.3 John wrote about knowing God.

[7:08] In 2.6 John wrote about abiding in him, and now John is writing about living in the light. So the believer who walks in the light shares a special intimacy with God through the work of Jesus Christ.

And of course the believer then shares the very eternal life of God. And to walk in the light is to live out the life of God. So the believer will give evidence that he's united with Christ and God as he meets the challenge and the opportunity to develop Christian character.

And so then his walk is in step with the command to love. And so having gone through all of these tests, John's original readers may have thought that John doubted their salvation.

After all, that would be a natural thing to think because you've got one of the apostles who was an eyewitness of Jesus telling you, well, you need to check this and you need to check that and make sure you behave this way and that way to make sure that you're Christian.

So it might be easy to be reading that and think, well, maybe he doesn't believe that we really are saved. John is going to deal with that concern in our passage tonight. After dealing with all those tests, tonight's passage should be very encouraging to all of us.

[8:17] And tonight we'll look at 1 John 2, 12 through 14. So let's go ahead and read those verses. In 2, 12 through 14, John says, 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.

So the first thing we see in these verses is a statement of a foundational fact. So it's a statement of a foundational fact. And you see what that fact is?

It's actually in verse 12. He says there again, I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. So the first and most fundamental word of encouragement that John can give all the members of the church is that in the past they were forgiven of their sins and that the forgiveness remains effective in their lives.

So they've come to know God as their heavenly father and as a result, they're part of God's family. So as we look at the different stages of spiritual growth later on in the lesson, keep in mind that no matter what stage a person is in, if you're a believer, your sins have already been forgiven you.

We need to look at a couple of things first, though, in verse 12, because the word little children, the word that's translated little children there in verse 12, is general for offspring of any age.

[9:56] So that's in contrast to a different Greek word for little children that we'll see later on in verse 13. But once again, the word there, little children in verse 12, is general for offspring of any age.

And remember, when John wrote this letter, he was very old. So to him, regardless of how old the other members are, he could call them little children. Plus, they were his children in Christ as well. But look at that verse again. Why does John say that his readers' sins have been forgiven? Right? He's addressing the church, and like it says there, your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

So it's not because of something that the readers had done. It's because of something that Jesus had done for them. And of course, we know that the forgiveness occurs because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, making the mercy and grace of God available to everybody who repents of their sins and believes in the name of Jesus.

And this is actually the first reference to the name in the epistles that John writes. And it has a close relationship to John 20, 30, and 31, which is the purpose statement of John's gospel.

[11:06] So just take a second here and listen to what John said in John 20, 30, and 31. He said, And truly, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book, that these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

So that sounds an awful lot like the purpose statement of 1 John that we read earlier, 1 John 5, 13. And remember that verse said, These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

So you can see that, whether it's in his gospel, or whether it's in his letters, making sure that true believers understood that they really are forgiven, and really know that they have eternal life, is something that's very important to John.

And we see in 1 John 2, 12, that all believers have forgiveness in Jesus' name. And from the verses we just read, we know that when our sins are forgiven, we also have life in his name.

So next, John is going to talk about some categories or stages of spiritual growth. And for each stage, we need to remember what we've already talked about. We need to remember the foundational fact that believers in every stage have their sins forgiven.

[12:26] So regardless of which stage you're in, it's not a question of whether you're forgiven or not. It's just a question of where you are in your growth after you have that forgiveness. Before we talk about the stages themselves, though, we're going to take a little bit of a detour through the Bible and spend some time defining spiritual growth.

So the definition of spiritual growth is what we're going to look at next. And we're going to jump around to several Bible verses. I've included all of the references in your handouts there.

And I've also included a summary of all of the things that we're going to say. So you don't have to worry about taking too many notes in this section. We'll summarize it for you, courtesy of John MacArthur.

And the first thing we need to know is that spiritual growth has nothing to do with your standing before God in Christ. So that goes back to what we've already talked about a little bit. Once again, it has nothing to do with your standing before God in Christ.

That's all settled. Because when we put our trust in Jesus, the righteousness of Christ covered us. And so the righteousness of God then covers us, regardless of where we are in that growth.

[13:31] And Paul's words in Philippians 3.9 illustrate that fact. That's where Paul said, And be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through

faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.

So our standing before God is already set. We've been covered with the righteousness of God because we have faith in Christ. So that doesn't change. Wherever we are in our spiritual growth, we have the same standing before God.

That's fixed forever. And for another quote from Paul on that point, listen to Colossians 2.8-10. Colossians 2.8-10 says this.

He says, Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and you are complete in him who is the head of all principality and power. So listen to the last part, verse 10 again.

[14:34] It says, And you are complete in him who is the head of all principality and power. So we're complete in Christ. Do you hear any qualifications in those verses about our standing before God?

It just says, We are complete in him. And it says we have the righteousness from Christ and the righteousness from God in Philippians 3.9. So once we are in Christ, we're already complete in him, regardless of where we are in our growth.

So God sees us in his Son as righteous. And because he sees us in his Son, he also sees us as perfect. And you know, that can be a hard thing to wrap our minds around, because we naturally want to do something to earn our standing before God.

But remember 2 Corinthians 5.21 when we think about that. 2 Corinthians 5.21 says, For he, talking about God, made him, Jesus, who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

So our standing before God is set because something God and Jesus did, rather than because of something that we did. And so that's why our standing has nothing to do with the stage of spiritual growth that we're in.

[15:46] The second thing to know about what spiritual growth is not is that spiritual growth has nothing to do with God's love for us. So once again, it has nothing to do with God's love for us.

It may be hard for us to believe that, but God doesn't love us any more or like us any better if we're more mature. And for proof of that, listen to the Gospel of John 13, verse 1.

So John 13.1 says, Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come, that he should depart from this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

So is anybody out there thinking, how does loving his own to the end prove that Jesus loves all believers equally, regardless of where they are in their growth? Well, the last phrase of John 13.1 says that Jesus loved his own to the end.

And to the end there is key, because to the end means to perfection in the actual Greek there. So it means he loved them to perfection. He loved them with perfect love. So we know from John 3.16 that God loves the world and sinners with compassion and common grace, but he loves his own children with perfect, saving, eternal love.

[16:58] And we know that God loves us regardless of what stage we're in when we think about the context of John 13.1. Listen to John 13.1 again and pay particular attention to the first part.

It says, Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come, that he should depart from the world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

So this was before Jesus was crucified. And before he was crucified, he already loved his followers perfectly. So think about what the disciples were like then. Were his disciples spiritually matured before the crucifixion?

If you remember, they were very immature. In fact, they were doubters and they were proud. In fact, they had just been arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom, and they were utterly insensitive about Jesus telling them about facing the cross soon.

Remember that nobody volunteered to wash the feet, so Jesus had to wash the feet of his disciples. So Jesus loves us with the perfect love. He can't love us any more because we're more mature, and he can't love us any less when we're less mature.

[18:08] He already loves us in the eternal salvation if we're believers, and he loves believers in the eternal glory. So it should be comforting to know that if he already loved his disciples with a

perfect love, as imperfect as they were, that same thing applies to all of us who are children of God today.

So another thing that spiritual growth has nothing to do with is time. So it has nothing to do with time. It's not measured by the calendar. Of course, there are some people who have been Christians for a very long time who are still very immature.

And the Corinthians were examples of that. Listen to what Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 3, verses 2 and 3. Paul said, I fed you with milk and not with solid food, for until now you were not able to receive it.

And even now you're still not able, for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? And then in Hebrews 5, 12 through 14, the writer of Hebrews, who just may have been Paul, says these words to believers who were still immature.

I had to throw that one in because I am filling in for Don tonight, so we have to have the reference to the writer of Hebrews there. But in Hebrews 5, 12 through 14, Paul or whoever wrote it said this. [19:26] He said, For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God. And you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who pertains only in milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.

But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. And the fourth thing that spiritual growth is not is it's not just related to knowledge.

Knowledge is a part of spiritual growth, but it's not just related to knowledge for that spiritual growth. Because we know there are people who have accumulated a bunch of biblical information, but they're still very immature in their Christian walk.

In fact, you may not even be a Christian and still know a lot about the Bible. Just because you have the Bible knowledge in itself does not prove that you're growing in the spirit. So unless the knowledge is pure, and unless it's applied to conform your life to Christ, that knowledge does nothing but fill your mind with facts.

So a fifth thing that spiritual growth has nothing to do with is activity. And even church activity or Christian ministry activity in itself is not a sign of spiritual growth.

[20:41] Because some of the most tragically immature people are the heads of some of the largest ministries in the world. You only have to watch some of the televangelists to see that as an illustration.

And then finally, spiritual growth has nothing to do with success that we have on this earth. You know, you'll find some people who try to tell you that, well, if you're blessed materially, then that must be proof that God likes you.

And of course, that was going on even back in biblical times. But think about the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul was content with suffering and persecution and weakness.

The fact that he was content had nothing to do with the circumstances. It had everything to do with his maturity. So he knew that temporal success, material goods, the size of the church, the size of the class he taught, or the level of influence was nothing to do with spiritual growth.

So do you notice something that all of those six have in common? It's everything that spiritual growth is not. And this is the summary that we put in the handout.

[21:43] Spiritual growth has nothing to do with your standing before God. It has nothing to do with God's love for you. It has nothing to do with time. It has nothing to do with just knowledge alone, even biblical knowledge.

And it has nothing to do with activity. It also has nothing to do with prosperity, temporal success, material benefit, or the size of ministry. So having looked at what it's not, let's look at some passages to see what spiritual growth is.

And 1 Timothy 6.11 is the first one that we'll look at. And we actually won't read the verse, but if you look at it, you'll find that it says, spiritual growth comes through the pursuit of righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and gentleness.

And then Romans 12.2 says, and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is good and is acceptable and perfect will of God.

So we can see from this verse that growth involves renewing our minds. Meanwhile, if we look at 2 Corinthians 7.1, we see that growth includes perfecting holiness.

[22 : 50] And here's what 2 Corinthians 7.1 says. It says, therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

We won't read the verse, but Philippians 3.14 tells us that growth is pressing toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. And then finally, Colossians 2.6 and 7 give us these words about spiritual growth.

They say, as you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walked in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. So we can sum up spiritual growth like this. Spiritual growth, then, is a process of taking in the truth of God and growing on the basis of believing and responding to that truth. So spiritual growth is directly related to an increase in your understanding of God's revelation.

So listen to that one more time. You also have that in your handout. Spiritual growth is a process of taking in the truth of God and growing on the basis of believing and responding to that truth.

[23 : 57] Spiritual growth is directly related to an increase in your understanding of God's revelation. So in other words, we have spiritual growth when we do more than just know what the information is.

We actually believe it, we respond to it, and increase in our understanding of it. And when we do that, that's when growth happens. So we've seen the statement of foundational fact and we just finished the field trip to look at the definition of spiritual growth and see what it's not and what it is. So in the rest of the study tonight, we'll look at John's summary of the spiritual growth stages. So the summary of spiritual growth stages is the third thing that we'll look at.

And we see that summary in verses 13 and 14 of 1 John 2. So let me read those again since it's been a little while since we've looked at those. It says, I write to you fathers because you have known him who is from the beginning.

I write to you young men because you have overcome the wicked one. I write to you little children because you have known the father. I have written to you fathers because you have known him who is from the beginning.

[25 : 01] 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. So in these verses, John compares three broad stages of spiritual growth with stages in human development.

Of course, it's pretty obvious to see what those stages are. He talks about little children, young men, and fathers and we'll take those stages in this order. So the end of verse 13 says, I write to you little children because you have known the father.

So remember what we discussed earlier when we looked at verse 12. That's the word little children in verse 12 is general for offspring of any age in contrast to the different Greek word for little children that's used here in verse 13.

So little children again goes in your blank there. The little children here in verse 13 refers to young children. So in verse 13, John is talking about spiritual babes in Christ.

So little children then are those who only have the basic awareness of God and need to grow. The main distinguishing act of babes in Christ is to acknowledge God as father and Christ as Lord.

[26 : 08] So they express their delight in the attachment. They express their delight in the new life that they have and in the joy of dependence on God. And of course, little children are more regulated by their emotions and feelings than by information.

So really, what's true about little children in this world is also true about little children in Christianity. They're more controlled by their emotions and feelings rather than by information.

They know who their father is and that's good enough for them. And of course, they are still forgiven but they don't have a lot of that deeper knowledge that will come later. So all believers start out then as babes in Christ.

And for proof of that, listen to Romans 8, 15, and 16. Romans 8, 15, and 16 say this. They say, For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear that you received the spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, Abba, Father.

The spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And of course, I'm sure you've heard this before. Abba is an informal Aramaic term for father that conveys a sense of

intimacy.

[27:14] So it's similar to the English terms for daddy and papa and it connotes tenderness, dependence, and a relationship that's free of fear or anxiety. So for abatement in Christ, there's joy that God is his father and Christ is his savior.

There's an affection for God and there's a delight in that spiritual life and in spiritual experiences. And of course, there's a joy that sins are forgiven. So that's where it all starts. It's not about information at that point and it's not about theology.

It's about a relationship. Then the middle of verse 13 and the end of verse 14 refer to young men. Young men is the next stage that we'll look at.

Verse 13 says this, I write to you young men because you have overcome the wicked one. And then verse 14 says something similar. The end of 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 wicked one.

So young men then are those who do know sound doctrine. They're strong against sin and error because they have his word in them. So verses 13 and 14 both say that spiritual young men have overcome the wicked one.

[28:30] So let's consider how knowing sound doctrine helps us overcome the wicked one. And the last sentence of 2 Corinthians 11, 14 says, For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.

So Satan is involved in false religious systems. Most of his activity is in false religion and he's a liar and a deceiver by nature. So he works in the false systems and the false ideologies of the world to deceive people.

But by knowing sound doctrine we can identify the false religions and protect ourselves from them so that we don't fall victim to what he tries to do to us. So that is how then figuratively as spiritual young men we can overcome the evil one.

So let's look at the third stage of spiritual development now and of course that's fathers. And it's sort of appropriate that we're covering this passage after Father's Day too because John is writing to them as a spiritual father as well.

Fathers are also referenced in verses 13 and 14 and the first sentence of verse 13 says I write to you fathers because you have known him who is from the beginning. And then the first sentence of verse 14 says I have written to you fathers because you have known him who is from the beginning.

[29:49] So very similar. One just says I write to you and the other says I have written to you but what he writes about is the same thing. So the third stage of spiritual development then is when you know more than the doctrine you also know the God who is revealed in the doctrine.

You really begin to plumb the depths of God's character and that's when your whole life then starts to become an experience of worship. So in a sense it's back to the relationship again but this time the relationship is much fuller and richer.

You're really fully informed by sound doctrine and because you know more and have grown more you really understand God's character so now you don't just know the doctrine you know the God who's behind the doctrine.

So fathers spiritually speaking then deeply and intimately know God and of course John is writing as a father here to the people that are reading this letter and to us and of course he deeply and intimately knew God directly but through his eyewitness testimony we talked about earlier we can know God as well.

So tonight's passage has a pretty straightforward application. The first thing we can see is that all believers go through stages of spiritual growth.

[31:03] So all believers go through stages of spiritual growth and then all believers regardless of the growth stage they are in are forgiven and I know I kept harping on that point tonight but it's very important to remember that if someone truly is saved that person is forgiven even though he may be spiritually immature.

Thirdly, all believers should strive to grow. Just because we are forgiven when we're bathed in Christ doesn't mean that we should always be content of being bathed in Christ. It would look kind of funny tonight if we all decided to go out and try to get a bottle and have a bottle for dinner rather than having solid food and that's kind of what John is trying to get across here too.

We should want to grow in our stages of spiritual growth. So that's why all believers should strive to grow. And then finally, spiritual growth is directly related to an increase in understanding God's

revelation.

So spiritual growth is directly related to an increase in understanding God's revelation. And of course, how do we grow in our understanding of God's revelation?

Yeah, we actually read it, pay attention to it, study it, understand it. And when we do that, then we will understand it even more.

[32:21] Listen to how Paul summarized spiritual growth. These are Ephesians 4, 14 and 15. We covered them a few Wednesday nights ago with Don and those verses say that we should no longer be children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the trickery and men in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting that speaking the truth in love may grow up in all things into him who is the head, Christ.

So it's interesting that Paul there picks up on the same analogy that John used. He talks about no longer being children but instead growing up into him and of course when he says into him he's talking about Christ.

So even though we may be saved when we're babes in Christ, our goal should always be to continue growing in that spiritual growth so that we'll be more and more like Christ as we go along in our Christian journey.

So let's make Ephesians 4, 14 and 15 our spiritual growth goal tonight and so let's read that one more time. He says, we should no longer be children tossed to and fro carried about with every wind of doctrine by the trickery and men and the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting but speaking the truth in love may grow up in all things into him who is the head, Christ.

Thank you.