

October 11, 2015 by Steve Brandon



A Message For Everyone

1 John 2:12-14

1. Who Are You?

2. Are You Maturing?

One of the greatest challenges of preaching is the diversity of the audience. And I live with this challenge every week.

Think about it, as I stand here this morning to preach God's word to you, there are children among us. I know that there are some who are 8 years-old. And, I suspect, some who are even younger than that. There are senior citizens among us. I know that there are some who are 80 years-old in our congregation. There are college students and moms and dads and grandpas among us. There are those who are newer Christians. There are those who have been walking with the Lord for longer than I have been alive (i.e. more than 50 years!) There are those who aren't believers in Christ.

And as I stand and preach, my words are supposed to be understandable and applicable to everyone! I need to speak plain enough for a young child to understand. I need to speak deep enough for an older saint to be edified. I need to speak to the needs of men. I need to speak to the needs of women. I need to speak to the needs of fathers and mothers and singles.

I need to challenge those who are comfortable in their sin. I need to comfort the weak in heart. I need to call the unbelieving to faith. As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, I need to "admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all."

Now, I have lived with this reality for years. My audience is ever before me. I am fully aware of all of the different ages and maturity levels among us. And I have done my best to try to address these things.

But, what has never occurred to me until this week is this: the Bible has the same challenge. It is written for young and old alike. It is written for the spiritually mature and for the immature. It is written for the believer and for the unbeliever.

There are plenty of books that can only be understood by a few people. A book written in French can only be understood by those who can read French. This is true of any language. But, apart from the language difficulty, there are plenty of books that require a level of understanding before you can understand their contents.

During my days of studying physics, I came across many books that I couldn't even begin to understand. They simply required a depth of math and physics that I just didn't have, and to this day, I never had.

Furthermore, there is a maturity issue. There are many books that children simply won't be able to understand. I remember trying to read, "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" to my young children. And even though trying to summarize what was happening, it was simply beyond their reach. It was too slow moving and complex for them to understand.

But, the Bible isn't like this. It is readily understood by all: young and old, mature and immature, believing and unbelieving. Oh, to be sure, there are many places in the Bible that is difficult to understand, and only the theologically astute can hope to understand. But, there is enough that is on the lower shelf for all to understand.

And, it has this masterful balance of how it does so. The New Testament opens with the story of Jesus, and even a little child can understand Jesus. And yet, there are things that he says that are difficult to fully grasp.

The Old Testament begins with the creation account. Even a little child can understand God creating the world in six days. And yet, there is enough complexity that it remains a place of debate among Bible believers. And in our text this morning, we will see the apostle John addressing his varied audience.

My message this morning is entitled, "A Message for Everyone." It comes from 1 John 2:12-14. And as I read it, I encourage you to look at the various members of his audience.

1 John 2:12-14

I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.
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.

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.

At first glance, it appears that there are three audiences to which John writes. There are the children and the young men and the fathers. However, there is a different Greek word in verse 12, "little children" and in verse 13, "children." Some translations bring this out (ESV, NASB), and some translations don't (KJV, NKJV, NIV). Some translate it "children" in both places, "as if there is no difference in audience. This actually might be accurate, as John might simply give synonyms here for linguistic variety, which actually might be the reason for the variation in verbs as well.

You note that three times, John says, "I am writing to you" (verses 12-13). And then, three times, John says, "I write to you" (or "I have written" to you, or even better, "I wrote to you") (verses 13-14).

And it's difficult to discern what exactly, if any, difference in meaning there is in these tenses. I read this week of 8 different views on the meaning of these differing tenses. Whether "I am writing" refers the whole letter or to what he is going to write; whether "I write" (or "I have written") refers to another letter he wrote before or to chapters 1 and 2 that he has written so far; or, whether these are simply ways to make his writing more interesting. Theologians try to figure out the exact meaning of what John is saying, but I'm not sure that any difference really has any bearing upon its application.

See, without dispute, John is fully aware of his audience. He knows that he has some young ones to whom he is writing. And he knows that he has some old ones to whom he is writing. And he knows that there are some in between (i.e. the "young men.").

And for each of these audiences, John has a reason why he is writing. To the "little children," he writes (in verse 12), "because your sins are forgiven." To the "children" he writes (in verse 13) "because you know the Father." To the "fathers," he writes (in verses 13 and 14), "because you know him who is from the beginning." To the "young men," he writes (in verse 13), "because you have overcome the evil one" And he adds (in verse 14), "because you are strong and [because] the word of God abides in you."

Note that all of these reasons are words of affirmation. They are encouraging words. They are words of affirmation. A good question at this point is this: "Why did John give these confirming words here?"

I think the reason is because of the difficult words that we looked at last week. They aren't difficult in what they mean. They are difficult in what they are saying. Look back at verse 9, ...

1 John 2:9-11

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

And the sensitive soul may easily be disturbed by such words. As he may look and reflect upon his relationships, not all of them are pretty. And some people have hurt him very much and there is a natural abhorrence toward them. And he is struggling with whether or not he really hates them. And the fact that John calls him to love them is difficult. John's words are hard.

So, before he goes on, John is seeking to encourage his readers, lest they drift into doubting their salvation. Remember, this book is written to give assurance and not doubt.

1 John 5:13

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

And John knows who is reading his book. And he knows that they haven't deserted as others have (2:19).

1 John 2:19

They went out from us, but they were not of us.

He knows that they believe in the name of the Son of God. And he's simply trying to encourage them. "Your sins are forgiven." "You know the father." "You are strong." "You have overcome the evil one." And all of these statements are helpful affirmations. Even for what's coming in verses 15-17, where, again, John is going to put forth some very strong words.

1 John 2:15

... If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

We will look at these words next week when we will be challenged to think long and hard about our relationship to the world and to the things in the world. And they will be difficult words. You simply cannot love the world if you are a lover of God. And again, the sensitive soul may be

led to doubt, rather than to assurance that they are indeed a believer.

And I believe that John's statements here in verses 12-14 are intended to help his readers through these difficult statements -- not by lessening the truth, not by lessening the reality of what God's children will know and experience, but by affirming their faith.

And to the extent to which these things are true, they will land with encouragement to the soul. But, if you are here this morning with hatred in your heart toward others (like verse 9 or verse 11 speak about), these words of affirmation won't comfort your heart. And if you are here this morning with a love for the world (like verse 15 is talking about), these words of affirmation won't comfort your soul. But, if you are here this morning with a soft and tender heart, I trust that verses 12-14 will land with truth today.

Though John didn't ever know any one of us, I know you. And as I seek to shepherd your souls, these words are affirmed in my heart toward most of you. I have seen the Lord working in your lives enough to be able to say, "I am preaching to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I am preaching to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am preaching to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I preach to you, children, because you know the Father. I preach to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I preach to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one."

By way of outline this morning, I simply want to ask two questions. Mostly, these questions come by way of application. First of all, ...

1. Who Are You?

Are you a child? Are you a father? Are you a young man?

Now, when I ask that question, I'm not asking about your age. I'm not asking you if you have crossed over from being a child to being a young adult. I'm not asking you if you have any children, to make you a father. I'm asking you about your spiritual maturity.

Because, that's what John is talking about. The little children (in verse 12) are those who are young in the faith. The fathers are those who are old in the faith. The young men are those who are strong in the faith and growing in their faith.

I say this, because, this is how John addresses his readers. Look at chapter 2 and verse 1, ...

1 John 2:1

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.

Now, in saying those things, John wasn't singling out those who are 12 and under, as if he were speaking to them and not to the rest of us. He was writing to the children, that they may not sin. But, as for the rest of us, we don't need to listen to his counsel. No, these words were addressed to all of us. Calling us "children" was simply a tender way of showing affection and care, and he was calling us to turn away from sin.

Look at chapter 2 and verse 18, ...

1 John 2:18

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.

Now, again, it's not as if John was writing only to the teenagers, as if they are the only ones who need to have a sense of what's going on in the world, that they might not be deceived. Because, of course, that wouldn't ever happen to the rest of us. No, these words were addressed to all of us. John was calling all of us "children" in the sense that he was able to speak as a father to his readers. The term "children" was an expression of love and compassion toward his readers.

And by the way, I will have you note that the word "little children" of chapter 2 and verse 1 corresponds with the little children of verse 12. And the "children" of chapter 2 and verse 18 corresponds with the "children" of verse 13. He addresses his readers in this way five other times. [\[1\]](#) And every time, it's an address to all of us as "children of God."

Indeed, this is how John speaks. Look at chapter 3 and verse 1, ...

1 John 3:1-2

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now,

All of us who believe, whether young or old, are children of God. We are called children because we are "born of God" (3:9). This is what Jesus was talking about with Nicodemus when he said, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Born "again," born "from above," a child of God is the only one who will enter the kingdom of God.

All of us who believe are children of God. The opposite of being a child of God is being a child of the devil. John addresses this in chapter 3 and verse 10, ...

1 John 3:10

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

In fact, this means that everyone who walks the planet is a child. He is either a child of God. Or, he is a child of the devil. And the book of 1 John is written that you might know the distinction. And that you might indeed be assured that you are a child of God.

And again, it comes back to seeing whether or not God is working in your life (3:10). Are you practicing righteousness? Are you loving your brother?

But, I digress. So, we return to my question, Who Are You? Are you a child? Are you a young man? Are you a father?

We see how these questions aren't talking about age. And they aren't even talking about your sex, whether you are male or female. John isn't writing these things only to the male half of the world. All of the other references to "children" or to "little children" are male as well, but they apply equally to women and girls as well.

No, these are simply illustrations of maturity. And so, I guess, my question could be rephrased. I suppose my real question is this, ...

1. How Mature Are You?

Would you consider yourself a mere child in the faith? Or, would you consider yourself a young man in the faith? Or, would you consider yourself a father in the faith?

Now, in some regards, this has to do with time. A child grows into a young man. And a young man grows into a father.

Not every time, of course. I know plenty of young men who are really children. They haven't taken on the responsibility that comes with being a strong young man. Instead, their life is all about play and avoiding responsibility. They don't go to school. They don't get training. They don't get a job. They aren't preparing to have a home (and family) of their own. Instead, they stay home and continue in their childish ways.

And I know of plenty of fathers, who are really children as well. Oh, they may biologically be fathers, but they are children themselves, refusing the responsibility that comes with being a father.

But, in general, this is the case. You know this. A child grows into a young man. And a young man grows into a father.

And spiritually, there is a parallel. We come into the kingdom as children. Jesus even said this. "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). But, as we continue in the faith and as we walk in the faith, we become stronger. The goal is maturity.

As the trials of life come upon us, they serve to strengthen our faith. James speaks of this in the first chapter of his letter, ...

James 1:2-4

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

The trials of life that come only serve to strengthen our faith. And we grow firm in our faith. We grow out of a child-like weakness and become strong.

As Paul warned in Ephesians 4:14, "... [we are no longer] to be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." But, instead, Paul continues, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). That is, as we walk through our days as believers, we ought to become strong in the faith.

Sadly, this doesn't always take place. There are those who come to Christ, but remain in a state of immaturity for years. Oh, yes, they know Christ and the forgiveness that he offers. But that's about all they know. Such a state is to be mourned, like the child that never grows up. Paul lamented the immaturity of those in Corinth with these words.

1 Corinthians 3:1-3

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh.

When the writer to the Hebrews wrote his book, he lamented that his readers hadn't grown in the faith.

Hebrews 5:11-14

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

And so, as I ask you this morning, How Mature Are You?

Now, in saying that, I know that it's difficult to answer, "I'm a child!" or "I'm a young man" or "I'm a father." As if there are only three options. You are one of these three. Certainly, there is a spectrum of spiritual maturity, which is difficult to quantify. But, it is good to think about, as John is addressing those of varying degrees of maturity.

Perhaps this is where my second question in my outline is helpful.

2. Are You Maturing?

In other words, are you growing in your faith? Are the things of earth growing strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace? Is Jesus becoming more and more your vision? Is he your best thought, by day or by night? Is Jesus the one you seek?

As you answer this question for yourself, it is instructive for us to see how John characterizes each of these stages of Christian growth. Because, you can see what is true of each stage. And you can measure and look back on your life and see if you have gone through these stages. So, look back again at verse 12, ...

1 John 2:12
I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

The message that children need to hear is that of sins forgiven. Indeed, this is the first message of the gospel. Jesus said, ...

Luke 24:46-47
"Thus it is written, that Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Indeed, this is what Peter proclaimed, shortly after the day of Pentecost, "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). Forgiveness of sins is central to the gospel. Paul wrote to those in Corinth, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Indeed, this is the first message of the gospel -- that if you believe in Jesus, all of your sins will be wiped away. They will be forgiven! Believing this is evidence that you are a child of God! This is the first step to maturity.

Look down in verse 13 at what else John says about children. He writes, ...

1 John 2:13
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.

Knowing God is also a first step to maturity. Several times in 1 John, John parallels "knowing God" with being a believer in God.

1 John 2:3-4
And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him,

1 John 4:7-8
Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.
Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Knowing God isn't the same as knowing "about God." No, it's having a relationship with him. It's praying to a person. It's following his lead. It's experiential. Many people talk about having a "personal relationship" with God. It's true. It's knowing God. It's one of the most basic realities of being a believer in God.

Let's move on to the young men. We see the progression of growth. John says (in verse 13), ...

1 John 2:13
I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

He says the same thing and expands upon it in verse 14, ...

1 John 2:14

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.

One of the things characteristic of young men is their strength. I remember being a young man. I was strong and could jump high. But alas, my strength is diminishing. One of the things that my father often says to me is how he just isn't as strong as he used to be. He said that there is a big difference between 60 and 70. And now, there is a big difference, he says, between 70 and 80. It's what I have to look forward to. It's what many of you have to look forward to.

Physically, that's how young men are. They often get stronger by lifting weights. Spiritually, young men are strong because of the word of God. Do you want to grow past being a child? Let the word of God abide in you.

Read your Bible. Memorize your Bible. Study your Bible. Work at it. Work at it while you are young. You will never regret it.

This is the key to conquering sin and overcoming the devil. Let God's word so shape your worldview, that the lies of Satan won't be able to lure you into sin. Convince yourself of the truth of verse 16.

1 John 2:16
For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.

I say "convince yourself" of these things, because everything in the world will try to teach you otherwise. But, the only way that you will come to conquer sin is to see it for what it is. It's a passing pleasure that will sever your relationship with God.

Convince yourself of verse 17, ...

1 John 2:17
And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

You will only do this through dwelling on the word of God. But more on that next week.

Never think that you have arrived. Be in the habit of always pursuing the Bible. But, beware, the Bible isn't an end in and of itself. It points us to God.

And this is the characteristic of fathers. They know God. They know him well. Verse 13 begins this way, ...

1 John 13
I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

Verse 14 begins the same way, ...

1 John 2:14
I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

In many ways, we are coming back again to what is characteristic of a child. A child "knows God." So also a father.

I do believe that the difference here is that the father's knowledge of God is tested and true. It has gone through the young man's stage of learning and growing. Now it is mature. It is a settled fact. Not much shakes it. Maturity tempers youthful zeal.

Really, all things come back to the basics. John Newton said, "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior."

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