

Introduction

Karen and I have nineteen grandchildren, and it is a joy to be with them, and to see them grow up. I watched the salutatorian speech given by one of my granddaughters, who just graduated from high school. She will be starting at Texas A&M this fall. This past week I also saw a picture of one of my grandsons, who was shaving for the first time. His voice recently changed and became much lower. He is exhibiting all the physical signs of transitioning into a fine young man. At the other end of the spectrum, one of my grandchildren is teaching herself to go potty by herself. She is under two years of age, so this is early. She no longer has to be fed; she feeds herself, and eats everything that everyone else eats. She has transitioned from being a baby into childhood.

There are characteristics of every stage of life. There are characteristics of new born babies, and infants. As they grow older, they no longer have those same characteristics. Just like they outgrow their clothes, they outgrow those things which characterized their previous phase. They now take on different characteristics. In each stage of our spiritual journey with Christ, we have different spiritual needs in our life.

When I got started in prison ministry, my first visit was with a man named Steve; and he prayed to receive Christ. I went back the next week to begin discipling him, and his bunkmate, John, received Christ. Now there were two baby Christians that needed to be discipled. Steve and John did not know how to feed themselves with the Word of God. They did not know about confessing their sins. They did not know about prayer. These were newborn babies in the faith, and they needed a spiritual father to pour into their lives. I began meeting with them every week and with the others that received Christ.

In 1 Peter 2:2-3 we are all exhorted to be like babies, longing for the pure milk of the word so that we can grow in respect to salvation. Steve and John needed the pure milk of the word so that they could begin growing in Christ. When I met with Steve and John, I did not start with a discussion about pre-tribulation or post-tribulation theology. I did not discuss the qualifications of elders. These were new believers, babes in Christ, and they did not need meat to chew on, they needed milk.

(1 Pe 2:2-3) “like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, {3} if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.”

In Hebrews 5, God rebukes older believers who were still needing milk and not solid food. They should have been teachers by this time, but they were still needing others to teach them elementary or basic principles. They had not learned to eat solid food yet. The men that I had led to the Lord were not who this rebuke was addressed to. Steve, John, and others needed milk. We see that there are different levels or stages of growth in believers and there are appropriate types of food for every stage.

(He 5:12-14) “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. {13} For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. {14} But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”

One of my favorite verses is Colossians 1:28-29. Paul said, “we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also, I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” Paul’s goal was to present every man complete or mature in Christ. The church has many people today that are not complete in Christ. Our churches focus on gathering people to listen to some good music and a good sermon, but very little discipleship is taking place. The Scriptures teach us to preach the gospel and make disciples, and both are important. Paul wanted to present every man complete in Christ. He was not content with people remaining babes in Christ, he wanted to bring believers to maturity.

(Col 1:28-29) “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. {29} For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.”

Today we are going to look at the stages of spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is about people becoming more like Christ, in their thinking, attitudes, and actions. Spiritual maturity is a process and everyone is at a different point in that process. John begins the passage by saying, “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven.” He is a spiritual father, and he is pouring into his spiritual children. In chapter one, he wrote about fellowshiping with God, and he talks about knowing the Father. Then, John wrote about sin. He wanted them to know that sin affects our fellowship with the Father, and that we must confess our sins. He wrote them so that they would not sin. He is teaching his spiritual children how to walk in truth. In his third letter, he wrote, “no greater joy has anyone than this, to see his children walking in truth.” This is what John wants for them, and this is what God wants for all of us, to walk in truth.

(3 Jn 4) “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”

In our passage today, John gives characteristics for each stage of spiritual maturity. In verse twelve, he identifies little children. In verse thirteen he addresses fathers, young men, and children. In verse fourteen he addresses fathers, and young men again. John has addressed all of us, no matter what stage of maturity we are at. This morning we will start by looking at little children. Next, we will look at young men. Third, we will look at fathers. Now, when John uses young men and fathers, he is not being sexist. Little children are new believers, male or female. The phrase, “young men” refers to believers that are reaching adulthood, male or female. Fathers refers to mature believers, male or female.

Maturing in Christ

1. Little Children (Spiritual Babies and Infants)
2. Young Men (Spiritual Adolescents)
3. Fathers (Spiritual Parents)

(1 John 2:12-14) “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.”

1. Little Children (Babes and infants in Christ) (1 John 2:12-14)

There are two things that John says about children. First, He said, I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. Then, in verse thirteen, he wrote, "I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. These are two things that young believers need to know.

(1 John 2:12-13) "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."

John addresses this first group as little children. How do you recognize what level of maturity a person is at? There are defining characteristics in the natural and also in the spiritual. In the natural, babies don't know how to walk or talk. Babies are totally dependent on others to take care of them. When they need something, they cry and don't stop crying until they get their needs met. Then, as they become toddlers, they learn to walk, talk and feed themselves. They begin teething at about six months. (Some babies begin teething earlier, but the average is six months.) Babies then learn to eat baby foods that do not require a lot of chewing. Later on, they have the ability to chew and eat regular foods. There is a process of growth that matches their physical development. We have to match the foods that they eat with their physical development. In the spiritual realm, there is a similar development. Babes in Christ are dependent on others to feed them. Babes in Christ cry to get their own needs met, and are not concerned about anyone else but themselves. Babes in Christ need milk, but as they grow, they learn to eat other things.

In 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, Paul tells them that he was not speaking to them as spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. He gave them milk to drink, not solid food, for they were not yet able to receive it. Then, he gave them some characteristics of their spiritual stage. They were still fleshly, evidenced by jealousy and strife. The Corinthian church is not the only church that has fleshly babes in it. There is plenty of jealousy, strife, and fleshly living in the church. Many in the church are still not able to eat solid food. They are still dependent on others to feed them and to meet their needs. The church today needs to learn to eat solid food and to deal with fleshly matters. They have to learn to deal with selfishness and self-centeredness.

(1 Cor 3:1-4) "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. {2} I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, {3} for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? {4} For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men?"

When we disciple babes in Christ and infants in Christ, we not only teach them to have a relationship with Christ, but we also must teach them about doing nothing from selfishness, and to look out for the interest of others. After 1 John, Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Philippians are excellent books for babes and toddlers.

(Php 2:3-4) "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; {4} do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."

When Steve and John came to Christ, what did I share with them? They had received Christ, but they now needed to learn how to walk with God and to grow in their faith. The first thing that I started with is to teach them how to get to know God.

The Navigators have had a great discipleship ministry and in their discipleship wheel, they have four spokes. The two vertical spokes have to do with our relationship with God. One of those is the Word and the other spoke is prayer. At the center of the wheel is the hub and Christ must be at the center of our life. He must be preeminent and have first place. When we come to Christ, we confess Him as Lord and place Him in the center of our lives. So, I taught Steve and John how to grow in their relationship with Christ.

I brought them each a Bible and taught them how to have a quiet time. I gave them a reading plan, and I did not start them in Deuteronomy or Leviticus; I started them in 1 John. It is a wonderful place for new believers to start. I taught them to read and to think about what they were reading. I had them write down questions about things that they did not understand. I taught them how to renew their minds so that their lives could be transformed. I taught them about memorization and meditation, and gave them verses to memorize. The verses that I gave them were from the Navigators Topical Memory System. They had verses about evangelism, and growing in Christ. They had verses on the character of God. They have an excellent set of Scriptures for new believers to memorize.

I taught them about prayer and how it is our way to communicate with the Father. I taught them the model prayer. Jesus' disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, and He taught them the Lord's Prayer, which is really a model prayer. I have found that many people in the church do not know about the Lord's Prayer. Many know it, but really do not understand it. I find lots of people who go right into their prayer requests. They do not begin their prayer time with hallowing the name of God. They barge into the throne room of God and begin telling Him what they want Him to do. I believe we come before the King of Kings and give Him honor and glory. We hallow His name. We come before Him with thanksgiving and praise.

(Luke 11:1-4) "It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples." {2} And He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. {3} 'Give us each day our daily bread. {4} 'And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.'"

In Psalm 100:4, we find that we are to enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise. I believe that is how we hallow His name. We come before Him with thanksgiving, and begin to thank Him for everything. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5 that we are to give thanks in everything. Thank Him for another day. Thank Him for His provision. Thank Him for His grace and strength. Thank Him for your salvation. Thank Him for cleansing you of your sins and for cleansing your conscience. Thank Him for friends. There is so much to be thankful about. We enter His gates with thanksgiving.

(Ps 100:4) "Enter His gates with thanksgiving *and* His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name."

(1 Thess 5:18) "in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

I also taught Steve and John to enter God's courts with praise. I taught them to begin learning to praise God for who He is. He is the Creator, so we praise Him by saying, "Lord, we praise You for being the Creator." We can elaborate on His creation by acknowledging how spectacular His creation is. We can mention the stars and the solar system, the plants, trees, and flowers. We can mention all the birds and their stunning colors and beauty. We can praise Him about the fish of the seas and so many other things. We can praise God for being a loving and forgiving God. In Hebrews 13:15, we are exhorted to "continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." All of this is part of hallowing His name in Luke 11:2. I taught Steve and John to give thanksgivings and praises to God. I think the church also needs to be taught the same things.

(He 13:15) "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name."

In Luke 11:4, we see that one part of prayer is the confession of our sins. I taught them about repentance and spiritual breathing, which is confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness from God. I taught them that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us of our sins. I taught them that confession is really just acknowledging our sins before God, and that He already knows every sin. Little children need to know that they are forgiven.

(Lk 11:4) "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation."

(1 Jn 2:12) "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake."

Many of the men in prison blamed others for them being incarcerated, so this was a big lesson for many of them. They had to take responsibility for their wrongdoing, and confess their sins before God. I showed them in the word how He has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west, and though our sins were as scarlet, He has made them white as snow. John said that little children knew their sins were forgiven and that they know God. I taught them that there was no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Many of the men lived in condemnation and had poor self-esteem. I made them look at me, eye to eye, instead of looking down or away. These are principles that these new believers desperately need so that they can begin to grow in respect to salvation. We need to make sure we teach new believers these great truths.

(1 Jn 1:8-10) "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. {9} If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. {10} If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us."

(Ps 103:12) "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

(Is 1:18) "Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, "Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool."

(Ro 8:1-2) “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. {2} For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”

I saw a lot of growth in Steve and John, and they grew in different ways. Steve began reading the Bible that I gave him and he was like a newborn baby with a great appetite. I saw tremendous growth in Steve, and found out that he was a real leader. Because of Steve, many other people in his pod committed their lives to Christ. John, on the other hand, had poor eyesight from all his drug use over the years. When men and women were received into the prison, their glasses and contact lens were taken from them, and so they could not see or read. The prison did allow us to bring generic glasses and distribute them. Our church would buy glasses with various corrections and distribute them. I might have a 1.25, 1.5, 1.75, 2.0, 2.5 in a pack and I would let inmates try them on and see which worked best for them, and I would give it to them. John’s eyesight was so bad that he had to depend on Steve to read to him. But John prayed. He prayed a lot, and I saw tremendous growth in John. His life was rapidly being transformed, and his relationship with Christ was very deep. His growth came primarily out of spending time in prayer with the Father. Both the word and prayer are vitally important in all of our lives.

A few months after John received Christ, he was released from prison, and went to his elderly parents’ house. About the second or third day at their house, he climbed up on the roof to adjust their TV antenna. While getting off the roof, he fell and died. His parents called me to do his funeral. John’s life had been so radically changed that their son was a different person than they knew before. John had spoken to them about me and why his life had changed. So, they asked me to come and preach his funeral. It was the first funeral that I ever preached, and it came about because they saw a different John than the man who had gone to prison.

2. **Young Men** (1 John 2:13-14) (Spiritual Adolescents)

The second group that John addresses are the young men. Again, this is not just referring to men, but is used generically to include men and women who are no longer little children, but they are not spiritual mothers or fathers yet. They are spiritual adolescents or young adults in the faith. John wrote three characteristics about adolescents: 1) young men have overcome the evil one, 2) young men are strong, 3) young men have the word of God abiding in them.

(1 John 2:13b, 14b) “...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. {14b} 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.”

Some of these characteristics go hand in hand. You cannot grow strong without growing strong in the Word. You cannot overcome the evil one without knowing the Word of God. It is the sword of the Spirit. So, having the word of God abiding in us is a key to all of these three areas. The one characteristic of young men that John repeats twice is that they have overcome the evil one. This is obviously an important aspect of becoming young men. Many people in the church have not been taught much about spiritual warfare, yet this is an important part of becoming a mature believer. Our discipleship of believers needs to include training in spiritual warfare and overcoming the evil one.

In Jesus' ministry, He role-modeled and He taught His disciples about spiritual warfare. In regard to prayer, He taught them to pray about temptations and not being led in evil. When sending them out, He commanded them to cast out demons and to heal people. When they returned from ministry, He told them He was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. The disciples were heavily involved in spiritual warfare because Jesus had trained them.

(Mt 6:13) "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]"

(Lk 9:1-2) "And He called the twelve together, and gave them power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases. {2} And He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to perform healing."

(Lk 10:18-20) "And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. {19} "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. {20} "Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."

In Paul's epistles he taught about spiritual warfare. He wrote to the Corinthians about it in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6. He said that we do not war according to the flesh, and that the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh. He wrote to the Ephesians about it in Ephesians 6:10-20. He told them to put on the full armor of God so that they could stand firm against the schemes of the devil. He also told them what he had told the Corinthians, that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, powers, world forces of darkness, and against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

(2 Cor 10:3-4) "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, {4} for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses."

(Eph 6:10-13) "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. {11} Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. {12} For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*. {13} Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm."

The apostle Peter spoke about spiritual warfare in his letters. He said that the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, and to resist him, being firm in their faith. James, the half-brother of Jesus, who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, also spoke about spiritual warfare. He exhorted the church to humble themselves and submit to God and to resist the devil, and that the devil would flee from them. The apostles were trying to bring the saints to a place of greater maturity.

(1 Pe 5:8-9) "Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. {9} But resist him, firm in *your* faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world."

(Jas 4:6-8) “But He gives a greater grace. Therefore *it* says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE." {7} Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

Young men have learned to overcome the evil one, that is Satan, and his spiritual forces of darkness. Part of overcoming is overcoming the temptations. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness in all things, and without sin. How did He respond to the different temptations? He responded with the Word of God. We must encourage children and young men to memorize scripture, so that they have it available in their time of need. The devil looks for opportune times to tempt us, and we have to be sober, alert, and prepared. We have to teach children and young men how to overcome the temptations that the enemy puts in front of us.

(Lk 4:1-13) “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness ... {13} When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.”

(Heb 4:15) “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”

I encourage young people to memorize 1 Corinthians 10:13, where Paul shares some excellent truths about overcoming temptations. He wants us to know that the temptations we face are not special; they are common to man. We are not the only ones to be tempted. Second, he reminds us that God is faithful, and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able. That is important. We need to know that we CAN resist and overcome this temptation. We do not need to succumb, and we should not succumb to this temptation. We need to be determined and confident in our resistance. Third, Paul wants us to know that God will provide the way of escape for us in every temptation we face. We need to be looking for that way of escape. We need to be asking the Holy Spirit to show us the way of escape. It is not enough to know the way of escape; we must be determined to take the way of escape.

(1 Co 10:13) “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”

Sometimes the way of escape is to flee from the temptation. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6 to “flee immorality.” That is what Joseph did when Potiphar tempted him; he fled. It is not just immorality; we are instructed to flee from idolatry and other sins.

(1 Co 6:18) “Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.”

(Ge 39:12) “She caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me!” And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside.”

We need to teach children and young men to make no provision for the flesh. In overcoming addictions and other sins, this is critical. We must make no provision for the flesh. We need to avoid certain places and people. We need to get someone to bear with us, and to hold us accountable. We need someone to walk through the trials and temptations.

(Ro 13:14) “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.”

In Proverbs, Solomon instructs us not to take the street of the adulteress. We are to stay away from her. He was talking about making no provision for the flesh. It is not putting ourselves into temptations. Children and young men need to learn to overcome the evil one and his temptations.

(Pr 5:8) “Keep your way far from her And do not go near the door of her house,”

(Pr 7:25) “Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, Do not stray into her paths.”

Another area of training for young men and women is in discovering their spiritual gifts and using it to serve the body. Paul spoke about spiritual gifts to the church in Rome in Romans 12. He addressed spiritual gifts with the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Peter addressed spiritual gifts in 1 Peter 4:10-11. He told them that they had each received a special gift and they were to use it in serving one another as good stewards. Today, many Christians don't know their spiritual gift and what God has called them to do. That tells me we need more discipleship in the church.

(1 Pe 4:10-11) “As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. {11} Whoever speaks, *is to do so* as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves *is to do so* as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

The Apostle Paul wrote about bringing the church to maturity in Ephesians 4. They need equipping and one of the areas of equipping is in using their gifts. He said that when every joint supplies and is working properly, it causes the growth of the body. Learning about spiritual gifts and using our gifts to serve others is part of becoming a mature believer.

(Eph 4:13-16) “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. {14} As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; {15} but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, {16} from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

When Rick Warren was the pastor at Saddleback Church, he uses a baseball illustration in his discipleship program. I commend Rick for having a well-designed discipleship plan and for doing his part to bring people to maturity. He has four levels of classes. In the 101 class (first base), new believers are taught about church membership, and this includes reasons for church membership, his purpose statements, and their beliefs. In Class 201 (second base), their goal is Spiritual Maturity, and they teach about the importance of the Word of God, prayer, and fellowship. In Class 301, the focus is on “Discovering My Ministry.” He looks at peoples' gifts, abilities, experiences, and passions. In Class 401 (home plate), the goal is to help people discover their mission. That class is about evangelism and fulfilling the Great Commission. While he does not follow the outline that the Apostle John gave us, when people go through all four of these classes, they are taught many things that disciples should be taught.

3. Fathers (Spiritual parents) (1 John 2:12-14)

In regard to fathers, in verses thirteen and fourteen, John wrote, “because you know Him who has been from the beginning.” The leading characteristic of fathers is that they know the Lord. We may come into a relationship with the Lord as a new believer, but we spend a lifetime getting to know Him. Fathers have walked with the Lord and developed a strong relationship with Him. They know His ways. They know His names and about His character. They know His heart and mind. They know His word. They know His priorities. Fathers know Him who has been from the beginning.

(1 Jn 2:12-14) “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.”

Fathers are leaders. They have spiritual sons and daughters. They have been mentoring others. The development of fathers happens at the young men stage. We want young men and women to become spiritual parents. In one sense, the spiritual father stage is positive fruit from being mentored as a new believer, and then as a spiritual adolescent. On the other hand, fathers need mentoring also.

What is it that fathers need in regard to mentoring? Even fathers need fathers, but their needs are different. They don't need to learn how to have a quiet time. The term “fathers” signifies that they have children. Their needs are very different than little children and young men. I have found that fathers need encouragement. Paul wrote to Archippus in Colossians 4:17, “Take heed to the ministry which you received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.” I don't know how old Archippus was, but I am under the impression that he is coming down the home stretch and Paul was encouraging him to take heed so that he can finish and fulfill his ministry. Fathers might get tired or discouraged and just leave the ministry. Paul has God's heart and encourages Archippus to fulfill his ministry.

(Col 4:17) “Say to Archippus, ‘Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.’”

I have found that fathers need more advanced leadership training that will help them mentor and father others. They need training about more effective methods of leading. They need sharpening. Solomon wrote that as “iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” Fathers need occasional sharpening. Their leadership and management skills need sharpening.

(Pr 27:17) “Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”

In George Barna's book, *Better Together*, he said this about fathers. “Fewer than 10 percent of pastors feel their church is good at developing new leaders.”¹ The fathers of the faith today need

¹ Better Together, George Barna, 2021,

help in learning how to develop new leaders. Over 90% of pastors don't feel that they can develop new leaders. They need help, particularly in leadership issues.

A few years ago I wrote a book called, *A Comprehensive Guide To Biblical Leadership*. I agree with Barna's statement that pastors need help today in developing leaders, which I believe is why the Lord impressed me to write the book. The book covers many different leadership topics, including the following:

- Calling of leaders
- Character of leaders
- Capability of leaders
- Capacity of leaders
- Core of leaders
- Communication of leaders
- Categories of leaders
- Correction of leaders
- Checks and balances in leadership
- Challenges in leadership
- Confidence of leaders

We can teach all these leadership topics, but at the end of the day, the chief characteristic that John gives is that fathers know Him who has been from the beginning. Fathers know the Lord. Fathers in the faith prioritize their relationship with the Father. Listen to what the apostle Paul said in Philippians about knowing Christ. "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ." Paul was a father, and he prioritized knowing the father.

(Php 3:8) "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,"

Conclusion and Applications

People are at different stages of development in their spiritual lives. It is not based on physical age; it is about spiritual maturity. There are many older people who are still baby Christians, and at the same time, there are many young people who are spiritually mature. John has addressed his spiritual children at every stage. He is giving them a road map to spiritual growth with milestones for every part of the journey. John wants his "children" to walk in truth.

Little children, infants and children, have been forgiven of their sins, and they know the Father. Young men are strong, have overcome the evil one, and the Word of God abides in them. Fathers know the Father. They have walked with the Father, and know Him who has been from the beginning.

The first application is about being born again. John has address his spiritual children, starting with knowing the Father and having your sins forgiven. When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus, He told him that unless a man is born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. To become a child of God, you must be born into the kingdom of God. Are you a child of God? Have your sins been

forgiven? Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Do you know God? If not, I invite you to receive Christ into your life today. Ask Jesus to come into your life and to forgive you of your sins. If you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, that He came and died for our sins, and was raised on the third day, you simply need to ask Jesus to come into your life and to confess Him as your Lord. That means that you turn over the reins of your life to Him.

The second application is for those who are believers, and it is to assess your spiritual life and write down a few things that the Lord has impressed on your heart this morning. Where do you see yourself? What are the things that you need to be working on in your life?

Do you see yourself as a baby or infant Christian? Do you struggle with unforgiveness, or do you feel free from all guilt and condemnation? Are you spending time with God? Are you reading your Bible every day? Are you learning to pray? Do you see growth in your life?

Do you see yourself as a young man or young woman in the faith? How are you doing in spiritual warfare? Have you learned how to put on your spiritual armor? Are you strong in God's word? Write them down.

Do you see yourself as a spiritual father or spiritual mother? Are you mentoring people and making disciples? Are you raising up the future leaders in the church? Do you feel qualified and competent to raise up leaders today? Are you in need of encouragement and stamina to fulfill your ministry?

No matter what level of maturity you are at, God wants you to keep growing in your faith. He wants each of us to be mature and complete in Christ.

Closing Prayer

“Father God, I pray that you will help us to be a church that is walking in the truth. Help us to be a growing church, growing in our spiritual maturity. Help us to be complete in You. Jesus, we acknowledge You as the Author and Perfector of our faith. You are the Potter and we are the clay. We ask You to mature and perfect us. We ask You to mold us and make us more like You. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.”

Discussion Questions

- Where do you see yourself this morning? What are the things that God has impressed you to work on?
- Why is it important for us to know that our sins have been forgiven?
- How do young men become strong?
- How do we get the Word of God to abide in us? What are the things we must do?
- What does it mean to overcome the evil one? What are some examples of overcoming the evil one in your life?
- What are some things that we must do to know the Father?

Maturing in Christ (1 Jn 2:12-14)

Introduction (1 Pe 2:2-3, Heb 5:12-14, Col 1:28-29, 3 Jn 4, 1 Jn 2:12-14)

1. Little Children (Babes and infants in Christ) (1 Jn 2:12-14, 1 Cor 3:1-4, Php 2:3-4, Lk 11:1-4, Ps 100:4, 1 Th 5:18, Heb 13:15, 1 Jn 1:8-10, Ps 103:12, Is 1:18, Ro 8:1-2)

2. Young Men (Spiritual Adolescents) (1 Jn 2:13-14, Mt 6:13, Lk 9:1-2, 10:18-20, 2 Cor 10:3-4, Eph 6:10-20, 1 Pe 5:8-9, Jas 4:6-8, Lk 4:1-13, He 4:15, 1 Cor 10:13, 1 Cor 6:18, Ge 39:12, Ro 13:14, Pr 5:8, 7:25, 1 Pe 4:10-11, Eph 4:13-16)

3. Fathers (Spiritual parents) (1 Jn 2:12-14, Col 4:17, Pr 27:17, Php 3:8)

Conclusion and Applications