

A Lifetime of Gratitude

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Bible Text: 1 John 2:12-14

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Let's take our Scripture and let's go to 1 John 2. I haven't looked at my records but I know it's been at least 25 years since I have spent any quality time in 1 John and it's been enlightening and encouraging. This is one of those texts that I think you would look at and say what do you do with a text like that? But there are some wonderful things here and encouraging things and I want to just talk about how we ought to be filled with gratitude no matter where the Lord has us in our spiritual pilgrimage. He actually divides the Christian life pilgrimage into three sections. Let's look at here together in 1 John 2, John writing to the saints says in verse 12,

“12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. 13 I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. 14 I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”

He talks about little children, he talks about young men and he talks about older men. It's interesting to note that that's a perfect parallel to where Christians basically are. There are those who are brand new in the faith and when you're brand new in the faith, there are a few basic things that fill your heart and mind. Then there are those who are a little further along. You might say they're in the “trying years” of their Christian faith; it may parallel to the teenage years of physical growth. That time comes when you begin to learn that the world is against you and temptations are at every hand and you begin to realize that the old unredeemed humaneness, if you will, you can call it the old flesh, I don't care what term you use but there's a part of you that's not yet cleansed and glorified that pulls, that lusts, that drives you into disobedience and sin and there's a battle raging there much like a teenager faces as they begin to go into life and begin to understand the temptations and the hormones are raging, etc. etc. Then there's that time when older men who've walked with the Lord a long, long time, more seasoned and more understanding and hopefully more humble and more grateful. Basically, he talks about all three of those areas and he talks about how each one is different but the point is: we ought to be grateful to God –

now listen – because grace brought you to each point and grace carries you through to the end. It's grace. It's God's strength; it's God's provision or you'd never be in any of these.

Now, he begins by saying, “I'm writing to you little children,” and that's a very tender and compassionate term. The Apostle John is writing as a pastor, in his pastoral heart he writes to these church members and says “little children,” but also he's the agent of Christ. He's expressing the very heart and mind of God toward Christians. God literally looks at us, I'm convinced, in a familial love, a parental love that is very precious and very caring. Little children. I meditated on that a while and I thought think about how we express our love and our affections for little children. It's something you can only experience. I don't think you can explain it but as one explains it to another who has experience it, it warms your heart and you all say, “Well, yes, Amen. That's how I feel.” Being a grandparent for the first time, it's just as wonderful as everybody said it was and I've decided that's why you have kids, just to have grandkids. You just get through them so you can get to the rest of them but it's a wonderful thing. But think about the attention that we give to little children. You know, we watch them when they're just tiny things and we listen for every coo or every yawn means something. Just a yawn, think about that. But it is true we do that. Every little peep; every little whimper. We even listen to make sure they're breathing and that's precious.

Think about how attentive we are to little children. We even today have these monitors. I wonder if it messes up a child to grow up with all these cameras on them? From the time they come into the world, they're just monitored and somebody's watching them all the time. By the way, turn them off when they get to be teenagers, just don't do that. That kind of attentiveness is just a part of being a parent and then the affections that we have for them. You just can't get enough of hugging them and holding them and caressing them and stroking them and nothing like kissing a baby. They're just so sweet and so tender and their complexions are so wonderful. You rub their noses; you bump foreheads; you tease them; you play with them; and you sing to them.

Now, the Scripture wants you to think of your heavenly Father as having that kind of affection and that kind of attention for you. Have you ever really done that? Your heavenly Father has that kind of deep emotion but here's the thing: far greater, far weightier, far richer is the heavenly Father's attention and affection for his precious, here's the word, little children. In Mark 14 when the Lord Jesus is praying, he cries out to his heavenly Father and he calls him “Abba Father” and you know that the word “Abba Father” is that endearing, familiar term and it means “Poppa” or “Daddy.” You would not use the word “Abba” if you were talking in a dignified way and saying, “Father,” but this is that endearing child to a loving parent terminology, Abba Father. But then the Apostle Paul turns right around in Romans 8:15 and says we do the very same thing. We can cry out from our hearts to our God “Abba Father.” What a thing. What a truth. All the rich loving attention and affection and care has for children.

Now, as lost sinners, we were the enemies of God and we could go on and on about the doctrine of depravity, the waywardness of our hearts, the deep offensiveness of our very nature, much less all of our behaviors and attitudes and motives that came out of that

rotten depraved heart and every bit of this was repulsive to God, every bit of this called for the justice of God to crush us in righteous condemnation, yet God chose in a heart of infinite love, to save us. Now listen: he didn't save you to make you his woeful slave that he might let you into the corner of heaven and watch you closely, oh no, he saved you so that you might become his little children, that he might know you and pour that affection and that love and that care and that attention toward you and we will always be his little children and we should be grateful to God for that no matter what stage of life.

Let's first of all talk about the beginning years. When he talks about children in verses 12-14, he's not talking about physiological children or even emotional children, he's talking about spiritual children, those who are brand new in the faith. It says there in verse 13, the last phrase there, he says, "I have written to you children because you know the Father," and I think that's one of the most wonderful things about a brand new child of God. When a person is first converted, there is just that knowledge that God is real to them. He's real and he's near and he's wonderful. I remember that so distinctly and well. I would hope that all of our children are genuinely converted at a younger age and we work to that end. Our whole Sunday School curriculum is designed from the nursery up through literally high school now so that we might pour into the hearts and minds of our children and our young people the great truths and the doctrines of God because you can't be saved until you know something of God. It's all to the end that they might come to that realization of his awesome greatness, his infinite holiness, the wonder of who he is that they might see themselves as sinners and see his provision of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. As we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, we come into this new relationship with God where all of a sudden God is real. Again, you just can't explain that.

I don't know why this came to my mind, I guess because I saw him on television the other day and that was our last President Bush and I remember, I think it was in a televised debate and they asked him about his spiritual experience because he had something of a reputation that he had had a Christian new birth or born-again experience. They asked him about that and they said, "Can you tell us about your spiritual conversion, your conversion to Christ?" They may have used the phrase "the new birth" and he said, "Well, to be honest, you just have to experience it to understand it." That's a good answer and that's the way a new child of God is: there is something that becomes real to them and they have new spiritual DNA inside of them and they begin to be drawn to others who have that same joy and that same realness and they may not know a lot but they know the Father. Now, they may not know him well but they know him.

I remember as a new believer how little I understood the Bible and I'm not ten years of age now and I'd become converted and I didn't know anything. Oh, some of the embarrassing things I did in those early days of preaching. I'm still doing embarrassing things; my staff and my family make sure that I'm aware of those every time I do them. I sometimes say, "Did you hear anything else I said in that sermon other than that terrible blunder when I really said something very wrong?" But, nevertheless, oh goodness, Nicodemus was Nickodamus, the leper was a leaper and you know, you just name it. I

didn't know much and you don't know much – no, maybe if you're raised in a good church but I wasn't but you know the Father.

It's amazing how much a new believer may not know but it's even more amazing who they do know and that's what's beautiful and wonderful about it all. The Bible says the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are the children of God. The Bible says that the man in John 9 said, “You know, I don't know whether this man is a true prophet, I don't know what all of you are saying but I once was blind and now I see.” He didn't know much but he said, “I know he's changed me,” and that's the way a new child of God is. Matthew, the tax collector, is gloriously converted. The next day or two, I don't know the exact chronology but it was almost immediately after he was converted and he throws this great banquet, this house party, and has all of his old running buddies over and invites Jesus over that he might let them meet Christ and he tells the Lord Jesus, “If I've robbed or wronged anybody, I'm going to pay it back double and get it all right.” Well, he didn't know anything but he knew the Lord and he knew he needed to get some things right.

So John writes here and says, “Man, you ought to be grateful that God has changed your heart.” You may not know much, some of you sitting here today, and we've had a lot of people born into the family of God the last couple of years and you may not have learned a lot, you may not know a lot but you do know the Father and you ought to be thankful. Deep gratitude that God has let you know him and joy fills your heart over that.

A second area, not only the little children, those who are just beginning but we ought to be grateful for the “trying years.” Now, they are all trying down here. We are in enemy territory as Billy Sunday used to say. They'd say to Billy Sunday, the old gospel preacher, he'd sometimes break chairs and throw stuff and do all kinds of things but it was in a day before they had amplifier systems and Billy Sunday used to say, “I had to do something to keep everybody listening.” One guy said, “Well, Billy Sunday, you stroke the fur on the cat the wrong way,” and Billy Sunday said, “Well, the cat's headed toward hell. If it would turn around and go the right way, I'll be stroking it right.” That's the way it is in the Christian life: God save you to make you a Christian in an antichrist spirited world. And Lord willing, that's what I'll deal with the next Sunday night I preach: the antichrist that's already present in today's world.

We're going against the grain. Now, we shouldn't look for trouble but as I preached in the sermon this morning, you're going to find some trouble and what you're going to also find is a whole lot of the trouble is you. You are the biggest trouble you've got. What did the preacher say? “It's not my brother, it's not my sister, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” I call this really the teenage years of the spiritual experience. Some of the rush and some of the thrill of salvation is now gone and we're struggling to learn to live by faith and we're learning that we act on our will, not on just high emotions. Now, new believers and young believers are often real emotional. By the way, we should never denigrate emotions; we should never deny or discourage rich and joyous emotions that come up, especially in the heart of a new believer. However, a few years go by and you begin to learn – are you here, are you struggling here – you begin to learn the hard lessons that, “I don't let my emotions dictate my Christian life.” That's where a lot of

church hoppers come from. They get their emotions involved and the next church that has the next exciting thing, well, here they go. And you've got to grow and mature that you don't do your family that way, you don't do your spouse that way and you'd better not do your job that way. Some days just aren't fun but you're still supposed to work for your employer like working unto the Lord and certainly not to do your Lord that way.

So, you begin to learn as you're maturing some in those “trying years” that you do what you do because it's right and you trust your emotions to catch up with the truth. I've said those kind of things to you over and over again but I'm going to keep saying them over and over because that's one of the foundation stones of sound emotions and a sound psyche, if you will, and that is learning to make your emotions submit to Christian discipleship. Did you hear that? You've got to disciple your emotions. You've got to teach your emotions to get in line with truth as I've said many times. And I struggle here too, I'm not speaking to you as one who has arrived but I am speaking to you as one who's in the battle. You've got to learn to stop listening to yourself and talk more to yourself and talk the truth to yourself.

But these “trying years” are comparable in the physical realm to the troubling and trying teenage years as a young person is trying to grow up and trying to be an adult and we seem to be in an age or in a culture where we don't ever want people to grow up. What is our culture going to do next? Now they're saying: if you're homosexual or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered, all that's wonderful and good and fine. I mean, it's almost like any lust that can come across your heart and mind, “Well, just go with it, buddy.” It's just give in to everything that happens. Brothers and sisters, the whole goal of maturity is to learn to control your lusts and passions, to submit them to the rule of God and the truth of God so that you can enjoy them the way God intended and not destroy yourself by giving in to every lust that comes up. Those are trying years, aren't they? We learn that this life is not about instant gratification. Isn't it funny how a baby comes into the world and it's, “I want. It's mine,” and when you say give that up or give that candy back to Suzy or whatever, “No!” I mean, the whole world is about them and the Christian kind of comes into Christianity that way and they begin to learn that instant gratification and self-gain are not the way to go.

Verse 13b, he says, “I'm writing to you young men,” that's that middle stage, “young men because you've overcome the evil one.” What does he mean here when he says “overcome the evil one”? I think what we need to understand here is that he is not saying you quit sinning. Those who teach that doctrine that you get to this point in sanctification and somehow “zap” some experience happens and all of a sudden you don't sin anymore. Well, of course we reject that. That's completely unbiblical. As a matter of fact, John says in his epistle, “If you say you've not sinned, you call God a liar. The truth's not in you.” There are those trying things and those difficult things but I think the point is that he's saying, “If you're God's, God didn't let go of you and you may wrestle and you may fail and you may struggle but you are going to make it and it's God's grace that gets you through.”

By the way, as Christians go through difficult seasons they need some boundaries. We've got to be careful: not all the rules apply to all the people. If they're clear in Scripture, they apply to all of us but different people need different boundaries and certainly in raising children you need boundaries, just in the natural realm. Go out here to the bridge that goes across the Tennessee River and you just ride right across it. How many times has your car literally bounced off the guard rail on that bridge going across the river? How many times have you really needed that guard rail to keep you from falling in? But what happens if you go across that river and maybe they're doing some kind of construction and they have taken all the guard rails down where if you drive on there, it's just over, there's just nothing there? I couldn't drive across it. First thing I'd do is run off because there's nothing there. You're laughing because it's just kind of weird, isn't it? Well, we need those boundaries: we need those boundaries spiritually; we need those boundaries physically in our lives.

We can be grateful because as we go through the "trying years" we have a heavenly Father who can sympathize with us, the Scripture says. Really, he has empathy with us. He has felt what we felt. Hebrews has a powerful truth there where it says that he has felt the weight and the depth of the weakness, the struggle, the trial, the temptation, if you will, yet without sin. Many times scholars have argued Jesus felt more weightily the trial of temptation because he never did sin. He felt all the temptation and never yielded where all of us yield at some point so we don't know the full blow because we gave in before the full weight came. But Jesus is one who, with his loving, fatherly care, empathizes with our weakness and how beautiful and wonderful that is.

Another part of this overcoming is that he's equipped us to overcome temptation and we know the means that God has provided for this. The word of God is a great means. You need to be faithful in the word of God; you need to have a daily quiet time. I challenge you to find an accountability partner and oh, how powerful Scripture memorization and meditation is to overcome temptations in your life but don't think it's this magic potion that once you memorize so much Scripture and meditate on it "boom" you don't sin anymore. No, it just helps you in the fight; it enables you to walk in more victory than you did before.

Then, of course, sitting under the preaching of the word of God is an essential means of growing and maturing and overcoming, if you will. Fellowshiping with the saints of God. Oh, the wonderful truth of small group ministries. How wonderfully powerful it is to be out in the world and know that if I fall headlong into sin, I've got brothers and sisters who are going to come after me. Always in love, always with compassion but there's going to be an element of accountability and challenge for me to keep walking with the Lord. You know one of the most powerful means of overcoming in this world is? That God forgives everything. The goodness of the Lord leads to repentance, that's what the Scripture says. Every true child of God who meditates on the absolute unconditional pardon of God through the infinitely loving Jesus Christ is humbled to say, "Oh God, that's just so good." And it drives us to want to honor God more and please God more and serve him more faithfully.

We ought to be grateful to God and honoring of God during those middle years, you might call them, those spiritual teenage years that correspond or line up to maybe the teenage physical years. He tells these young men “you have overcome.” Not quit sinning, but, “I praise God for you because you've overcome the evil one. You're still in the fight. You haven't given up. You're still going forward for the glory of God.”

Lastly, verses 13a and 14a. Notice he says, “I write to you, fathers, because you know him who has been from the beginning.” Now look at verse 14, the first part, “I've written to you, fathers, because you know him who has been from the beginning.” I think this has the idea that you have a rich and deep journeying now with God. John was in his latter years when he wrote this epistle and the Apostle John is reflecting, I think, on his own life and the deep and rich joy and peace that living a long and holy life brings in knowing the Lord. They asked Dr. R. G. Lee, the pastor of the famed Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis one time how he grew old and seemed to be doing so well. Dr. Lee said, “I'm living on the dividends of a well-spent youth.” Well, that's what older men should be able to tell, “It's been worth it to walk with the Lord. It's been worth it to honor the Lord in my life. It's been worth it to fight the fight during those more tempting years.” Now, the temptations never cease but there are those seasons when it's just raging and it's more difficult and those days and those weeks and maybe even those months when you seem to fail more than you find victory but you don't quit. And the God who saves you draws you back. And the God who chose you brings you back to him. He may bring a humbling into your life, a trial into your life, he'll bring something and yank you back close again because you're his. Of all that the Father gives Jesus, he loses not one.

Then the years roll by and the seasons go by and the longer you serve him, the sweeter he grows. You've know him who's been from the beginning. You don't want to grow old like the man who is asked what he does in his retirement and he says, “Well, I just sit and think and then I just sit and think and sometimes I just sit.” Oh, there's more than that. Don't you want to grow old sweet? Grow old joyous? Grow old richly treasuring Christ? Grow old so that the young people who love Jesus want to be around us because we express the sweetness and the goodness of God? I want you to ask God tonight as I ask God tonight, “God, don't let me grow old bitter. Don't let me grow old hard. Don't let me grow old blaming others for what happened to me or happened to my family or happened whatever?” Somebody did you wrong, everybody's been done wrong but nobody's done anybody more wrong than you've done God wrong and he's fully forgiven you. “God, let me grow old being a blessing to the people of God.” I've asked God many times as a pastor, “God, let me grow old effective for you in some way.” Maybe young pastors could come around and just be a blessing and encouragement to them and talk to them that it's been worth it. I think that's what he's talking about here, men who are fathers, if you will, of others in the ministry or just in the faith, not pastors necessarily who have a testimony.

You see, I think God wants to use us in our latter years. I don't know what's happened and we have some of the sweetest, best saints of God who are in their latter years and they serve faithfully and I thank God for them but, you know, that's not typical. Very often, the senior adult department is, “I ain't doing nothing. You're going to have to do it

for me,” mentality. Oh, we don't want to have that mentality. I looked some things up. You know Galileo, the great early scientist, made his greatest discovery at age 73. He did some of his best work at age 73. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary in China, was doing some of his greatest church planting and wonderful new roads were opening up for him for the gospel in his latter 60s and early 70s. Caleb defeated the stronghold of the giant at age 85.

On and on we could go with how God brought men through the beginning years when we're so excited: we know the Father, we know his forgiveness but we don't know much and we're growing and learning. Then there's “trying years” where there's lots of battles and lots of weakness and lots of defeats but God didn't give up on us and we've got to be repenters and keep going. Then there are those latter years when we ought to be at our very, very best. I like older folks who have a sense of humor too. They still have some joy left in them. Dr. Adrian Rogers used to share years ago he followed Dr. R. G. Lee at Belleview Baptist Church. I had the great and wonderful privilege of Dr. Rogers asking me to come and spend the day with him not long before he retired at the church there and what a blessing that was. He used to tell the story of when he took Dr. Lee's place. Dr. Lee was still there and he told Dr. Lee, “Dr. Lee, is there any way we could just take off the cap of my skull and take my brain out and put your brain in here?” Dr. Lee said, “Son, that would be like putting a grand piano in a broom closet.” Just, that will never work. I love that. I guess maybe all pastors feel that way to young whippersnappers that come along but nevertheless...

Let me just read one quote to you and I'll be through. A well-known Bible teacher, Wendell P. Loveless, described the sight of a woman he met in Illinois. He said, “She's 64 years of age and she's been shut-in for more than 16 years, confined to her bed and in constant pain. She's unable to move a limb but she's one of the most thankful people you would ever meet. She rejoices that God has left her a great blessing, she can still use the thumb on her right hand. The other hand is clenched and stiff and is utterly useless but with two pronged forks, she's learned with that one thumb to fasten it to a stick and with that she can put on her glasses and remove them again but it all takes great effort. By the same method, she's learned to feed herself and she can sip her tea through a tube. She does all of this using only that one thumb. She can also turn over the leafs of a large Bible when it's placed within her reach. A visitor once heard her say joyfully, 'I have so much to be thankful for.' When asked the source of this happiness, she answered, 'Well now, my sins are all forgiven and I can just lay back and daily drink in the great love of Jesus my Savior.' Asked if at times her restricted way of life made her fretful and despondent, she replied, 'I'm perfectly content to lie here as long as it pleases the Lord to let me stay in this world and I'm also ready to leave whenever he calls me.'”

We ought to be grateful. Grateful like that new believer who's just glad they're saved, glad they know the Father. Grateful for that latter year believer, those trying years when there are trials and difficulties but God's grace keeps you and – listen to me – he never stops forgiving you. You never become unsaved. You never cease to be his. Be grateful for those trying years and be grateful for those latter years when your testimony is like

the songwriter, "Tis grace that's brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home."
And it will.

Let's stand together in prayer.