

OPEN UP YOUR BIBLES TO: 1 John 2:12-27, pg. 1021 – 1022

Let's start today with a pop quiz. Don't worry. It shouldn't be hard. Here it is.

If you want to bring out the best in another person, should you:

A. Raise expectations and demand the best of them?

B. Nurture them and begin where they are.

Do we follow the advice of so-called tiger moms, who, according to author Amy Chua, use strict discipline to bring out the best in our children, or do we use a more Western approach that focuses on the self-esteem of our children?

We probably won't solve this debate today, but I'm sure that most of us fall somewhere in the spectrum between these two extremes. Some of us want to challenge and be challenged. We like when someone is blunt with us and calls us out when we could do better. We don't want to be coddled. Others of us wilt under that kind of scrutiny. We need encouragement rather than challenge if we're to grow.

A WORD TO GENUINE BUT STRUGGLING BELIEVERS

The reason I bring this up is that John seems to address both kinds of people. We're spending a few weeks looking at some letters most likely written by John, Jesus' closest friends, to the church in Ephesus. If you've ever looked at these letters, you will have noticed that John uses strong language. He writes using a style that's in your face. It's not meant to try to convince you of

anything. He writes in absolute, black and white terms. He wants to strengthen your belief in what you already believe to be true.

So last week we looked at a passage in which John tells us how we can know if we have genuine faith or not. John gives us three tests. We can know we have genuine faith if three things are true:

We pass the truth test by believing that our sin is a problem, and that Jesus is the solution

We pass the obedience test by obeying God even when we don't understand or agree with what he says

We pass the love test by loving other believers

After hearing these tests that John put out there, some of you may have walked away from last week's sermon wondering if you're a Christian.

And that's what John tends to do. John is challenging us to examine ourselves. He doesn't want us to play games or waste time. And some of us are grateful. We need what John has to say.

But you may be here today feeling like you're barely holding on. You have genuine faith, but you're feeling pretty weak right now. Some of us didn't come to church feeling confident in our faith this afternoon. We mustered what little faith we have and dragged ourselves here with more questions than answers, not really sure if we have enough to keep on going.

John anticipates this.

READ: 1 John 2:12-27, pg. 1021 – 1022

So John says:

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. (1 John 2:12-14)

At this very moment, all of us are at different stages in our relationship with God. Some of us aren't believers at all. As we say every week, we are a church that welcomes you. We're privileged to have you here. We're honored. As we read the gospels we see that Jesus had all the time in the world for people like you, and we do too. We're so glad you're here.

Some of you are spiritual children. To you, John says in verse 12: remember that your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. You may not have much faith, but it's about the object of your faith, not the quantity of your faith. If your faith is in Jesus, and you have only a little bit of faith, remember that Jesus said:

For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."
(Matthew 17:20)

John doesn't write to discourage you. Don't ever be discouraged if you are a child in your faith. Remember that your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. You know the Father, even though you're just starting out. Stake your life on that. He has his grip on you and his grip is secure. Remember the words of the song:

When I fear my faith will fail

Christ will hold me fast

When the tempter would prevail

He will hold me fast

I could never keep my hold

Through life's fearful path

For my love is often cold

He must hold me fast

Some of us are more spiritually mature. John refers to us as fathers. We're farther along. We're more unruffled and secure. If that's you, John commends you. We need more who are spiritually mature.

But there's a third category, and it's where John spends the most time. He speaks to young men. You're not young in the faith but you're not mature either. What John says to you is important. You're needed. The young are too immature to lead the church, and sometimes the more mature are too tired to lead the church. We need you to step up and play your role. And you're going to be able to do it because of three things that John mentions: because

you're strong, because the Word of God is in you, and because you're overcoming the evil one as you dwell in God's Word.

I want to pause for a minute and say that one of my highest desires and priorities as a pastor is to invest in some of you who are in this category. We need strong, still developing disciples to step up. You matter. We're counting on you. Please don't ignore God's calling on your life. We need a whole bunch of you deployed. We're counting on it. And I want to help. If that's you, then talk to me. I'd love to explore with you how we can plan to see you use your strength for the mission that God's given us.

John's given us three tests so that we can know whether we have genuine faith or not. I encourage you to examine your life carefully, because there's nothing more important than knowing if your faith is genuine or not. John doesn't want you to go through life thinking you're a follower of Jesus Christ if you're really not. So examine your beliefs — whether you believe you're a sinner and that Jesus is your only hope. Look at your obedience and look at your love. These three tests will help you know whether your faith is genuine or not.

But if you look at your life and see that you have genuine faith, but that you're a bit wobbly in that faith, then be encouraged. We're all at different stages. If you're young, stake your life on what Jesus has done for you. If you're mature, keep going. If you're growing, we need you. Keep in God's Word and lean into growth. We need you to know whether or not you have genuine faith, and then we need you to keep going and to keep following.

DO TWO THINGS

Let's get really practical as we think about how to grow no matter what stage we're at. John gives us two ways that we all can grow. If you want to know what steps to take right now, both of these are important for everyone here. Genuine, struggling believers: don't live for this world, and don't settle for lies about God.

1. DON'T LIVE FOR THIS WORLD

Look. If Christianity isn't true, then you should work hard enough to be successful, but not so hard that you don't enjoy life. You should maximize your pleasure and make as much money as possible. The good life means that you look after yourself and enjoy life as much as possible.

This is, by the way, how most of us live, even those of us who are Christians. Get ahead, have fun, and maximize pleasure. The problem? We're living for things that don't ultimately matter. We're playing the short game. And so John says:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 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. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

What's John condemning in these verses? Not the pursuit of immoral things. He's condemning the pursuit of temporary things as if they're really important. When our lives are no different from everyone else's, and we're pursuing the same things as everyone else — getting ahead, making a name for ourselves, and living the good life, then it's a sign that we don't really get it. All these things are passing away. Don't chase after them. They don't really matter.

What's the alternative? Live for the things that will last. Live for the things that really matter. It's not that these things are bad. It's just that they're not permanent enough for you to build your life upon them. Other things matter a whole lot more. Love God, not the things of this world.

Last year we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The Reformation is the rediscovery of the gospel, when some in the church rediscovered the truth that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone for God's glory alone. It's more than just a historic footnote. Men and women were willing to die for this truth. They didn't love the world or the things of this world, because they knew the world is passing away with all its desires. They knew that whoever does the will of God abides forever.

I think, for instance, of Hugh Latimer, who started out as a passionate Catholic. Latimer gained a reputation as an extraordinary preacher when he was a student at Cambridge University. Upon completing a degree in theology in 1524, he gave a lecture in which he attacked the German Reformer Philipp Melancton for his high view of Scripture. An evangelical asked to meet him after the lecture for confession. Latimer thought that he

had converted the evangelical, but the opposite happened: Latimer was moved to tears and for the first time he came to understand the gospel. He became a powerful preacher of the gospel.

When Mary Tudor took the throne, Latimer was arrested and jailed in the Tower of London. He was taken to Oxford to be tried and was found guilty because of his beliefs in the gospel. 463 years ago, he was burned at the stake in Oxford, England. As they died, Latimer encouraged one of the other martyrs, Nicolas Ridley:

“Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust never shall be put out.”

He was echoing John, right? Can you hear it? **“Do not love the world or the things in the world...the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”** Hugh Latimer understood this. He lived for things that last. He loved God more than life itself.

Years later, another martyr said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose” (Jim Elliott).

It's worth asking ourselves: what are we living for? It's very easy to settle for a life that's all about good things that won't last forever. Most of our goals have to do with this life. Latimer discovered the value of setting goals that have to do with eternity. When he died, it wasn't a great tragedy. He lost everything that's temporary, but he wasn't living for those things anyway. He had something that not even death could take away. It's worth asking:

are we living for something that won't even matter 50 years from now? Or are we living for something that will matter for eternity?

No matter where you are in your growth, live for the long game. Don't build your life on what won't last and what doesn't matter. Build your life on what matters most. Love God more than all the temporary things.

2. DON'T SETTLE FOR LIES ABOUT GOD

In verses 18 to the end, John warns the Ephesian church against false teachers who left the church. What's surprising is that he calls them antichrists. Usually when we speak about the antichrist, we think of some huge, historical figure. But here John talks about little antichrists: people who, according to verse 19, had been part of the church, but who had denied that Jesus is the Messiah. David Allen in his commentary on 1 John wrote this:

If you were Satan, how would you go about diluting and destroying the church of the Lord Jesus Christ? You might say, "I would bring foreign pagan armies in and try to kill all the Christians." But that has never worked. If I were Satan, I would sow the seeds of false teachers within the church. I would not enter the church and say that Jesus is a liar and Jesus is not divine. I would come in like an angel of light, and with crafty cunning I would lead the sheep astray little by little through false teaching.

John is highlighting two dangers that will stop us in our tracks spiritually: loving this world and believing lies about God. These are going to be two of the greatest spiritual dangers that you face:

playing the short game, and thinking that what you believe about God doesn't matter.

In the passage we've read today, John speaks to the Ephesian church, to some who may have felt like they don't measure up spiritually. He has reached out to them and said: your genuine faith matters. You may not have much of it, but if you have even a small amount of faith in Jesus Christ, then we can build on that. It's not the amount of faith you have; it's that your faith is in Jesus. It's that he is your hope.

But then he tells us how to grow. Don't live for this world. Don't settle for lies about God. You have faith? Good! Avoid the two greatest dangers that will derail your faith, and grow.