

1 John 2:12-17 "A Blessing for Everyone" May 8, 2005

A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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You might think it is strange that on Mother's Day I am preaching on a passage that mentions fathers twice but doesn't mention mothers at all. But I don't think I am too far off. In this passage John speaks to "children," and that clearly includes both boys and girls. It is fair to figure that when he moves on the young men and to fathers, he is thinking of young women and of mothers as well. This letter was meant for the whole congregation. There was something in the passage for everybody in his congregation, and there will be something for each one of us as well.

Again and again the Bible uses the family as a picture of God's people. What happens on a smaller scale in families with parents and their children is what happens in congregations on a larger scale. A biological family has one father and one mother; a congregation has numbers of people who serve as faithful spiritual fathers and mothers, whether or not they are married, and whether or not they have biological or adopted children of their own.

So we will look at this passage in terms of three blessings that God pours out on the family, whether a family that is physically related to each other, or the family of God. The first blessing is forgiveness. The second is a confidence in our relationship with God. And the third is victory over evil.

There was a study done of those few teen-agers who had the clearest sense of purpose, and the inner resources to achieve their purpose. What did those young people have in common that set them apart from the vast majority who continued to stumble? Here is the answer: their parents were giving them positive messages of encouragement, but in addition they had a number of other adults, not just parents, who were all giving them the same messages of challenge and affirmation. Adults, of course, are the same. We all need numbers of people who are pouring themselves into us in one way or another.

Now the study was not conducted with churches in mind. But it seems to me that along with the family, the church is the best, the most likely place for people to receive input from a whole community of fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, and children. So as you think about this passage, try thinking of your individual family and the family of God at the same time.

Listen for the three blessings mentioned here that God our loving Father offers to his children.

The first blessing is forgiveness. John addresses this first word of blessing to his dear children. Some commentators say that “dear children” here means those who are just starting out in the faith. Many of them would be young in chronological age as well. Others say that the elderly Apostle probably includes the whole congregation under the title “dear children,” just as he called them all his little children back at the beginning of chapter 2. I don’t think it matters too much. If what he has to say applies to them as new Christians, it will keep on applying to them as they become more mature.

The first verse is dynamite, whether you are thinking of a family or a congregation. Listen to it: [read 2:12].

There is a wonderful little story that illustrates forgiveness. I have used it in classes, but I can’t remember if it has been in a sermon before. A little boy told his priest that he talked to God; he asked God questions, and God gave him the answers. The priest was skeptical. “Do you really mean that God actually gives you specific answers when you ask him questions?” “Oh, yes,” the boy replied. The priest said, “OK, let’s test this ability of yours. You go home. This afternoon I need to confess my sins to the bishop. You ask God what sins I confessed, and then come back tomorrow and tell me what they were.” The boy agreed. The next day, he came back to his priest. The priest asked him, “Did you ask God what sins I confessed?” “Yes, I did,” the boy answered. “And did God answer you?” “Yes, he did,” the boy replied. Then the priest asked, “Well, what sins did God tell you that I confessed.” The boy said, “God told me that he forgot.”

It is going to make a huge difference if you have a family, or a congregation, where people know that their sins are forgotten, or forgiven. By forgotten here I don’t mean that they are wiped from God’s memory, but rather that he never brings them up against us, never throws them in our faces, never relates to us based on those forgiven sins.

This verse ties in with what John has been telling us all along. We already saw a few weeks ago that if we hide our sins from ourselves, from God and from others, we deceive ourselves. But the moment we confess them and turn away from them, they are forgiven. If we were to ask God to remind us of what we had just confessed, he would say, “I forgot.”

Whether we think about biological parents in the family, or whether we think about mature Christians who serve as spiritual mothers and fathers, the message is the same: One of the greatest blessings we can give to our children is to teach and to model forgiveness. We must keep on saying, “If you have confessed it, if you have turned from it, God does not hold it against you. He will not go against his word. If you keep feeling guilty for a sin that you have confessed and renounced, you must tell yourself that those feelings are lying to you. You may need to talk it through with a trusted brother or sister or a counselor to get a handle on why you cannot believe you are forgiven, but in fact you are forgiven.”

Verse 12 offers the wonderful blessing of forgiveness, but there is a command hidden in there, too. Did you notice that John does not say, “your sins are forgiven by God,” but just, “your sins are forgiven.” Of course they are forgiven by God, but they must also be forgiven by the rest of the Christian community. I believe that this instruction to forgive applies especially to the more mature members of the Christian community, or what John calls the fathers and mothers. It also applies to Christian fathers and mothers in a family.

Children or younger Christians become confused when they hear their mothers and fathers talk about God’s forgiveness, yet they also pick up that those same parents continue to hold on to grudges and hurt feelings against others. If those we look to as Christian examples will not forgive, it is difficult to believe that the God they worship is a forgiving God.

To grow into healthy Christians, or even into healthy people, children in a home and young Christians in a church must experience continual forgiveness on the part of their Christian fathers and mothers. They, we, must have the experience of doing wrong, repenting of it, confessing it, making right where possible, and then never having it mentioned or in any way brought up against us again. That is what it means to walk as Jesus walked. John says we are forgiven on account of Jesus’ name. If we name him as Lord, then we must forgive.

Of course you cannot take the verse out of context. Last week we looked at how conflict, frustration, and confrontation were part of the life of Jesus. They will be part of the life of a family, and part of the life of a Christian congregation. Unconfessed sin in the family or the church must be

confronted. Forgiveness follows the act of repenting or turning away from the sin. Before forgiveness occurs, it may be necessary to bring the issues to light, to urge repentance, to figure out what exactly needs to be forgiven. Whether in a family or a congregation it takes time, and we may need help.

But once the issues are clear and we ask for forgiveness, then God our Father blesses us with forgiveness. Biological and spiritual fathers and mothers must offer the same blessing of forgiveness. In practical terms forgiveness includes not holding on to and replaying the offense in our minds, not bringing up the offense to the offender or to anyone else, and not relating to them on the basis of that past offense.

So the first blessing that God bestows, and mothers and fathers can in turn bestow is forgiveness. It is the basis of the blessings that follow. We find the second blessing, the blessing of confidence in our relationship with God, in verse 13. "I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning."

From the day we come to faith in Jesus we receive the blessing of forgiveness, and we begin to know God as our loving Father. But over the years and the decades the relationship becomes deeper. God's second blessing for us that John mentions is this: we will develop an intimate relationship with our Lord.

Several things happen once you have come to know someone. You trust them more deeply, and have increasing confidence in them. You often know what they want or what they are thinking without even asking them. You feel at ease with them rather than awkward. If other people want to know them, they might come to you and ask for an introduction. If you know a person really well, sometimes you develop the same interests and even become something like them. The blessing of a confident knowledge of God is the blessing that John mentions twice as the one given to the fathers, or to fathers and mothers.

I was once at a seminar on Christian parenting, and a man with several grown children was asked what he and his wife did in order to raise their children as Christians. He thought about it and replied, "I don't think we raised our children to become Christians so much as we lived as Christians before them." Along with forgiveness, the great blessing that parents can

pass along to their biological or spiritual children is the example of a life lived with confidence in God.

I remember once when our church was facing a big financial challenge that a woman from the congregation shared with a group of us the history behind the funding for the Christian Education Building. It was a huge challenge to cover the cost of that building, but it happened. The same God who was faithful then is faithful now. In telling that story, the woman was acting as a spiritual mother, modeling for us a life lived confidently with God.

Lots of times we will get it wrong. John has already told us that if we think we never miss the target then we are fooling ourselves. The forgiveness that God keeps offering is not just for the children, but for the parents as well. But despite our failures, as we keep on living faithfully over the decades, we receive the blessing of increased confidence in God, and that blessing will overflow to the next generation.

We've looked at forgiveness and confidence in God. Now we come to the third blessing. John mentions victory as the blessing for the young people: "I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one" (v. 13b). What in the world could he mean by that? Probably nobody, certainly not young people, believe that they have overcome Satan. John himself says that we continue to need forgiveness for our sins, and he was writing this letter to Christians who were getting all confused and thrown off by false teachers. What could he mean that the growing Christians, the generation younger than the "fathers," had overcome the evil one? I think he means that the war is won, even if there are some battles ahead.

You have probably heard the analogy of D-Day, June 6, 1944. On that day the Allied troops made a landing in Europe. They still had almost a year of fighting ahead, but once that landing was made, it was just a matter of time before the Axis powers were going to surrender. Once the "dear children's" sins are forgiven (v. 12), it is only a matter of time before Satan's hold will be broken, whether at the time they die, or when Jesus comes again.

But there is more to it as well. These three family blessings build on each other and nourish each other right in this life, not only in the next one. As new Christians, or children, experience God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of our elders in the faith, we are able to have fellowship with God and with other believers. In that fellowship we begin to experience

victory over the evil one. As we confess, as we seek help where needed, sins that have enslaved us begin to lose their hold. And in that whole process, we develop a deepening confidence in our Lord Jesus; we become more like him, and we in turn pass the blessings on to the next generations.