

From Thankfulness to Thank Forwardness

1 John 2:12-14

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It is Thanksgiving weekend. Many of you will gather with loved ones or friends for a meal. The turkey population has suffered a dramatic decrease over the past few weeks as they migrated from fields to freezers. We'll eat, drink, go to sleep and maybe see some folks we haven't seen for a while. Maybe we will go around the table and share one thing for which we're thankful this year. Then it's back to work on Tuesday. Is Thanksgiving nothing more than a holiday to get caught up on sleep? Or might it be something more?

When Thanksgiving comes, I think we face a challenge living in an urban area. Most of us do not depend on a good harvest for our livelihood. We have not borne the stress of the past few months where we hoped the crop planted in the spring would result in a bountiful harvest in the late summer. Not many of us faced a hungry winter if we didn't have a good harvest.

But imagine living 70, 100 or 200 years ago. It required faith and letting go of control when your family's survival depended on getting rain and sun while hoping for no hail or crop failure. So if you completed those 4-5 months with a good harvest you had great motivation for thanksgiving.

Yet for us it's different. Thanksgiving can come and go with barely a blip on our life radar. But is that the best use of Thanksgiving? Is that the most we can do with the blessings we have been given?

What about God who ultimately gives all our blessings? Does He just want us to sit around a table and give thanks to Him once in a while before we get back to our very busy and important lives? Or might He desire us to go beyond thankfulness? Might He want us to use what He's given for His purposes in our lives, other's lives and into eternity? The answer is a resounding YES!

The next portion of Scripture in 1st John shows this to us. Last week, we saw John describe authentic Christianity based on whether we love or hate our brothers and sisters. John has laid out some very plain teaching about true and false Christians. He wants to shake people up who think they're Christians but really aren't.

But it's now time for some assurance for Christians. John will remind his readers of blessings received and experienced with Christ in their lives. But he doesn't do this just so we can sit around and say "Thank you, Thank you God." He will call them to make tough choices in the verses that follow. So He gives them assurance and reasons for

thanks before urging them forward in their Christian lives. He does the same for us. John reminds us of our experience with Christ in our lives. It is appropriate to give thanks to God in response. He will call us forward.

So I want to invite you to see some blessings in our lives just because of Christ. These don't depend on whether or not we've had a good year. We experience them every day for which we can be thankful. Then we will have opportunity to move forward from thanks.

1 John 2:12-17
English Standard Version (ESV)

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

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

Do Not Love the World

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

We're focusing on verses 12-14 which contain the 3 blessings. But before we dive into them, we have to answer three questions about this text to interpret it accurately. Question 1- What's John doing here? Where does this come from after the light/darkness? Question 2 – Who are the little children, fathers and young men? Question 3 – What about women, females and young girls?

What's John doing here?

Why this sudden change after the talk about love, hate, light and darkness. It seems like there is no connection with what went before. But remember he raised a lot of questions about true and false Christians. He wants to contrast those still in the church with those who left. Maybe he sensed he needed to encourage his Christian readers. He does not mean to give them the impression that he thinks they are in darkness or that he doubts the reality of their Christian

faith. He regards the false teachers who left as the inauthentic. But he doesn't want them to conclude he's saying the same about them. So he stops to tell them of his view of their Christian standing. He will point to their experience with God to confirm their assurance in faith.

How do we interpret little children, fathers and young men?

Is John talking to three separate groups of people? If so, in what way are they little children, fathers and young men? Is he strictly speaking about their ages? Might he be talking about stages of spiritual maturity? Some argue that these three groups represent three different stages of spiritual growth – from little children, to young men, to fathers.

But there are a couple of problems with that. First, why would John put them out of order? He starts with little children. Then he goes to fathers and then to young men. On top of that, some of the blessings he lists apply to Christians no matter what their stage of spiritual maturity. Little children's sins are forgiven. But so are fathers and young men.

The most convincing explanation I could find goes like this. Little children refers to all Christians. He's already addressed everyone as little children in 2:1. Then fathers and young men refer to different lengths of experience in walking with Christ. Fathers walked with Christ a longer time. Younger men referred to those who were both young in life and young in the faith. That's the interpretation I will be adopting as we move forward. But then there's the third question.

What about mothers, women, young women? Why does John only mention fathers and young men? Does he think only males are forgiven, know God and overcome the evil one? He wrote in a male first society. In that culture, the father was the cornerstone of the family with great responsibility. But Jesus had broken the gender barrier in multiple ways. John lived under Jesus' teaching and saw Jesus' respectful interaction with women. John saw Jesus affirm and include them. Jesus allowed women to fund his ministry and appeared to them first after the resurrection. So I would say with much confidence that John included females in this description.

So he would apply the term father to anyone who has many years of walking with the Lord. Just as young men were strong and lived in the word overcoming the evil one, young women and those young in the faith join them. So when you read fathers, this includes women who have walked with the Lord for years and younger women – both in age or faith.

With this in mind, let's get to the three blessings in our experience with Christ.

The first is found in verse 12. "I am writing you little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake." **Little Children (Every Christian) Blessing #1 – Our sins have been forgiven.** We are forgiven on account of Jesus' name. On account of Christ's sacrifice of himself for us. Forgiveness of sins was central to the message of the Gospel in the first century. The apostles announced the good news. Your sins can be forgiven.

We can rejoice in the forgiveness of our sins. But this blessing might have lost some of its joy producing power for us. If we've been Christians for years and maybe even decades, we can forget the wonder and joy of that initial and continuing forgiveness of sins. It almost becomes too familiar to us. "Oh yeah, I've been forgiven, but let's get on to more pressing matters."

It's similar to when we forget the great sacrifices our soldiers made for freedom in times of war. We might not even recognize the incredible gift of freedom we've been given because we're so used to living with it. But go someplace where your freedom is restricted and you begin to appreciate what we have here.

You might have heard the story of the 2 Canadians who were traveling to the Gaza Strip in August by way of Egypt. But their arrival coincided with the massive uprisings and protest against the military government. So they observed the clashes. When the military swept through they were arrested. They spent several weeks in jail. During one contact with Canadian authorities, they described the appalling conditions of the prison – crowded; cockroaches and beatings. Finally this last week, they were released. The look on their faces revealed the deep appreciation they felt for being free from prison.

They lost freedom for a while. Upon regaining it, they greatly appreciated it. We can be so familiar with forgiveness that we don't even appreciate it anymore. But forgiveness of sins is one of the great blessings for the authentic Christian.

Yet there's another reason we might not appreciate the great gift of forgiveness. Today sin is mocked and minimized. "Oh, it's not really that bad. Everyone does that. Don't be such a bore." The more common sin becomes the less remarkable forgiveness seems. So if sin is ordinary or may not even exist according to some, then what's the big deal about forgiveness.

When we went to the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, something similar to minimized appreciation happened. It contains multiple large rectangular stones. The artist didn't define the symbolism. So we were all trying to figure out what it might mean. We noticed some children there. Now you can walk between the stones. Well, can you imagine a better layout than this for hide and seek or tag? So kids ran and laughed through the holocaust memorial. Though we adults may not have figured out the artist's intention, we knew it all referred back to millions who paid the ultimate price. Some of the adults scolded the children. Hopefully some others gently taught them about the meaning. Maybe some of those children began to grasp a little of what those stones meant.

We need reminders of the seriousness of sin and what it cost to forgive them. The Lord's Table is one way we can recapture joy for this great blessing. Remember the cross and the immense sacrifice Jesus made there for you. Remember how much you've been forgiven. Then we can rejoice and give thanks.

Blessing #2 – Fathers – people with many years of walking with Christ - You know the One who is from the beginning. (2:13b) If you've walked closely with the Lord, you've gone deeper with Him over the years. You know Him more. God is the one who "in the beginning created the heavens and the earth." But John wrote in his Gospel, "in the beginning was the Word (meaning Jesus). So this could refer to Jesus or the Father. But the point is that the fathers and mothers have come to know God and His eternal nature. They knew God who existed before time and through all eternity. We may not really think much of God's eternal nature when we're young in the faith. We're all excited about forgiveness, new life and sharing all we're discovering in Christ. But then we get on in years. Bodies and minds age and break down. Then God's eternal nature becomes more and more important. We're closer to our own mortality. We begin to think much more about eternal categories. It's almost like we consciously live with one foot in eternity. We look to those with long years of walking with the Lord for such a largeness of view.

I remember when I served as Associate Pastor in south Edmonton. The senior pastor resigned and I was kind of alone for a while. A man was dying of bone cancer in the hospital. He needed to be visited and I was terrified to go. I didn't know what to do or say. But then Willy Muller, a retired pastor and professor attended that church. He took me to visit this man every day until he died. Every morning we would meet at the church and make the journey to that ward. One of the most memorable lessons he taught me was simply this. "Death is a part of life. Once you accept that, you can go on living even in the face of death." Once he shared that, I began to engage with this dying man and his

family right through his death and funeral. I thank God for placing that spiritual father in my life at that time. He impressed upon me the reality of God's eternal nature. God existed from the beginning and before the beginning. God will never die or cease to exist. He holds the future and all eternity in His hands. John writes to you who know the one who was from the beginning. He writes to encourage and exhort you to continue in the faith, and pass it on and finish well.

Then there is a third blessing that John talks about. This one is given to the **Young men who are young people in age and faith. Blessing #3 – You have overcome the evil one.** Youth is a time of high energy, idealistic vision, willingness for conflict when necessary and great potential for service. We see young people involved in God's work throughout the Bible. The same word used here for young men is found in other places – the young men who had been spies - Heroic young spies rescued Rahab and her family in Jericho. A young Jewish girl told General Naaman of Syria about the prophet in Israel who could heal. The recruiting pool for the devoted Nazirite was filled with young people according to Amos 2:11. The courageous men along with Daniel who maintained faithfulness to Lord in Babylon were young men – Shadrach, Meschiah and Abednego. A young girl, probably about 14 years old named Mary gave birth to Jesus. God has all kinds of uses for the young. In the Gospels young people responded to Christ's ministry. Young men receive Pentecostal promises.

Here John declares they have overcome the evil one. They have fought the enemy and experienced some victory. If you're a Christian young person or young in the faith, you've already overcome the devil. God has called out to you and you responded so that you're one of His. The devil has lost you.

How did this happen? Maybe he's pointing to that in verse 14 when he goes back to the young man. I write to you young men because you are strong. Young people are normally full of vigor and life. But here the strength appears to be in the Lord. They are strong in Him and because of Him. Part of this strength is gained by God's Word living in them. The presence of God's Word in a person's life gives them great strength to resist and overcome the devil. Psalm 119:9 states "How can a young man keep his way pure – by living according to your Word." Jesus resisted the devil's attacks with God's Word. The more you know God's Word the greater strength you have to overcome the evil one.

In just 3 short verses, John encouraged these Christians with realities of their experience with God. Their sins are forgiven. Those walking with Christ for many years know the one who is from the beginning. And the young are

strong, living in the word and overcoming the evil one. These are great reasons for thankfulness. It is entirely appropriate and God glorifying to offer a thanksgiving prayer to the Lord for these and other blessings.

But we must move forward from thankfulness. Notice the letter does not end at verse 14. John is about to issue his first command of the letter in verse 15 which we will look at next week. So how might we move forward from thankfulness today? Or if we're not even thankful, how we might kindle or spark thankfulness in our lives? One way is to think about what our lives might look like today if we did not have Christ?

Where might your life be if today if Christ had not saved you? I shared with you a couple weeks ago that in my early 20's, I was the judgmental young adult who thought that if I believed right and lived right (at least on the outside) I was alright. I lacked that love that is a necessary mark of the authentic Christian.

I could have turned into an expert at being judgmental. You can become an expert at sinning. When Peter speaks against false prophets who were going about stirring up trouble in the church, he writes this in 2 Peter 2:14 – With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning, they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed – an accursed brood! If we don't turn to Christ and the Holy Spirit to give us power and the heart to overcome our sin struggles, we can become better and better at sinning. I . I could have been nice on the outside yet hard on the inside. Hard hearts turn away from God. Hard hearts lead to hell.

But Jesus wouldn't leave me there. He called me to the ministry. I was stubborn. I did not want to go into the ministry. I resisted the call. So he funneled me into going by closing every other door before me. I could find no work in my field of University Study. I couldn't even find work in jobs that do not require previous skill or experience. I felt like the only option I had left was to go to seminary. "I can't do anything else. I might as well go to seminary." If God did not do that, I wouldn't have met Lori, one of God's greatest blessings in my life. If Jesus hadn't funneled me here, I wouldn't have attended a men's breakfast about 24 years ago. There Willy Muller shared that his parents read 5 chapters of the Bible every day to them at breakfast. So by the time he was 17 and going to Bible college, he had been through his Bible 10 times.

I was a young pastor and hadn't read the Bible through cover to cover once! I was 26. So I began reading God's Word and though I still feel weak spiritually at times and I still have a long way to go, strength from the Lord has come because of His Word living in me.

I have not in any way come close to knowing the fullness of God. But I know Him better than I did 25 years ago. The more I know Him the more I see His glory and sweetness. I have discovered the deepest satisfaction there is to be found in Him. From His love, I can love those around me with a self-sacrificing love that is unnatural for me. I don't do it perfectly. You can ask my wife, family, the staff and leadership here for obvious evidence. But I really don't know what my life would have looked like apart from Christ, nor do I want to spend much time thinking about that.

The time is short for us to go forward in light of all that Christ has done in us and for us. Some choices that you make today can have profound and deep impact 25 years from now. Ask the Holy Spirit for His power and strength to live out a fully devoted faith. Ask for the Holy Spirit to empower you to know the one who was from the beginning, Jesus, more deeply this year. Ask the Holy Spirit to empower you to resist the devil's distractions and grow in God's Word this year. When the evil one comes, with the Scripture you have learned, resist Him and overcome Him.

Maybe you don't know Christ. He offers you forgiveness of your sins. He paid the price for those sins Himself with His own life and blood. Will you turn from your sins and seeking satisfaction in them and turn to Jesus by entrusting your life to Him. He will come into your life as you turn. He will save you. He will empower you to begin the incredible journey of the forgiven, knowing, strong, overcoming life under Christ.

So this Thanksgiving does not have to be just another holiday. It can be a time when by the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit, we moved from thankfulness to going forward. Will you ask the Lord for His power and strength to move forward as we come to His table?