

(1 John #12) Correcting Confusion

by J. Glyn Owen

J. Glyn Owen's sermon emphasizes the assurance of forgiveness and the importance of knowing God as foundational to the Christian experience.

Duration: 41:10

Scripture: 1 John 2:12

Topics: "Confusion"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the believer's closeness to God through the blood of Christ. The speaker emphasizes that every believer has a measure of knowledge of God, which is essential for eternal life. The apostle John is seen as a shepherd, providing comfort and encouragement to the faithful. The speaker also addresses the repetition in John's writing, suggesting that there is a natural sequence of thought despite the slight differences in tense.

Transcript

We continue this morning with our exposition of the first epistle written by John, and we turn to chapter 2, verses 12 to 14. 1 John, chapter 2, verses 12 to 14. I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you, for his name's sake.

I write unto you, fathers, because you have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because you have known the Father.

I have written unto you, fathers, because you have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one. Now there are those who speak of these words as a digression.

I find it difficult to concede that, believing that there is a very natural sequence of thought here, even though John is not continuing to pursue the pattern that he had begun in applying the tests. You remember, we have been considering two of the tests of a valid Christian experience. John would have us realize that genuine Christians can be recognized.

You can apply certain tests to Christian people, and you may recognize them thereby. First of all, there is the test, I say first in the order in which John has given them in this chapter, there is the test of obeying

God's commandments. A genuine Christian will obey the commandments of his Lord.

He may fail at certain points, but his heart is set upon doing the will of God. This is his bread, to use our Lord's words, my meat is to do the will of him that sent me. And where there is a man who is born again of the Spirit of God, who has the Spirit of Christ and the life of Christ within him, he too will be a person of the same desire, of the same purpose, of the same motive.

He will be dedicated to do the will of his Father, the will of God, keeping his commandments. The second test was this, it's the test of loving our brethren in Christ. Of course, the New Testament, and John himself will have us love beyond the family of faith, he'll come to that later on.

But in the first place, you may know a Christian because he loves the brethren. Now these are not altogether the Plymouth brethren. The Plymouth brethren will be among them, we trust.

But these are the brethren, these are men and women in Christ. All the family and the household of God should love one another. We may know, says John later on, that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren.

We love the family of God, doesn't matter what color their skin, doesn't matter whether they're rich or poor, doesn't matter whether they're this or that. If they're born of his Spirit and washed in his blood, we must make them ours in Christ. There is neither male nor female, bond nor free, barbarian nor Scythian or anything else.

The middle wall of partition between men has been torn right down in Christ. We welcome one another, we love one another in Christ. Otherwise, we simply do not know regeneration.

Now it's as drastic as that, my dear people, if we do not love the sense that there's something radically wrong in our experience. But now, you see, you can imagine, having thus expounded these two tests, there will be some in the church at Ephesus, as John was first of all addressing, who will smart a little. And some of them may feel, well really, am I a Christian or am I not? Now John has a point then, in the words that form our text this morning.

What he's doing here is this. He's thinking of those who have been upset a little by these tests. He was talking about the tests because there were certain heretics abroad who've divided the church and who've left.

They've taken their little group with them and they've gone out and they've got a little place of their own and they have some tenets which are not Christian at all, which they believe in and which they practice and preach. Now John wanted to show that some of them were not Christian at all, if not all of them. And so the tests were meant, you see, for the church to be able to discern the reality or unreality, as the case may be, of their Christian profession.

But now some within the church itself are smart. And so the purport of this passage is this. John is coming to comfort the genuine saints.

And what he's saying to them in summary is this. Look, he says, if you're a genuine Christian, and I believe that you are, he tells them that. He speaks as the apostle of God, the apostle of Jesus Christ, who knows them intimately.

And he assures them that they are. There may be degrees of development. Some may be but babes.

Others may be fathers and others in between, like the young men. But, says John, I believe that you all have known forgiveness and been born again and God is your Father and all of you have the Word of God within you and therefore you are able to face these tests with flying colors. It's a word of encouragement that we have here to the faithful.

Now we need this. If a ministry is always challenging, well, it puts people on edge. If a ministry is always comforting, it makes people sleep.

But you see, there's this marvelous balance in Scripture. There's the word of challenge, the tests. Now comes the apostle as the shepherd with his comforts to the faithful.

Now what's he got to say? Well, before we come to that, can I just mention one thing? It may well be that all of you have been a little taken aback by the measure of repetition here. In a sense, John repeats the same thing twice. Not quite.

There are differences, but the differences are, in a sense, minimal. One difference is this. First time around, as some of the translations make it clear, he puts it in this way.

I write unto you in the present tense. A second time around, he says, I have written unto you. Now, why? Why this change of tense, for example? Well, there are all sorts of suggestions made, but we really don't know why.

Some people, rather ingeniously, suggest that John was interrupted after writing the first time to the children and the fathers and the young men, and then he was interrupted. And so he takes up the pen and he says, now I have written unto you. Well, I don't know.

Really, we don't know why. Save this. If the Holy Spirit, as we believe, is behind this repetition, it is here for emphasis.

When Jesus of Nazareth said, verily, verily, it was a point of emphasis. When the Holy Spirit sees fit to repeat a truth, it is for emphasis. And I believe, therefore, that there is something very significant in this repetition, not only for the original community that received this word, but for those of us here in Knox this morning who are going to hear what it has to say to us.

One other thing. Are there three groups here, or two? If you read the older expositors, such as Luther and Calvin, and I hope you do, from time to time, you will find that they insist that there are only two groups here. They say that John's general approach is to speak to all the Christians, irrespective of age, as little children.

John was an old man by this time. And everybody was young. Everybody was a child, and most of them were his converts.

And so he speaks to them endearingly. At least five times, I remember, in the body of this epistle, he speaks to all the community as little children. So Luther and Calvin, and quite a number of others, believe that there were two divisions here.

First of all, John speaks to them all as little children, and then the fathers and the young men. In other words, the mature and those on the way towards maturity. Well now, I prefer the other understanding of

this, that there are three divisions here.

For this reason, I doubt whether John would have repeated the first, my little children, if it was just a kind of general salutation. In any case, he does say different things to the three groups, as we shall see in a moment. Now, against that very inadequate introduction, let's come to the message.

There is a message here to babes, there is a message here to fathers, there is a message here to the young men who are in between. Now, John's message to the spiritual babes, to the little children, let me quote now from the Revised Standard Version, the first from the RSV, and the second from the New English Bible, because the translation is better here. I'm quoting the words to the little children in both instances.

In verse 12, I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. Then in verse 14, to you, children, I have written, because you know the Father. Now, before we come to it, can I remind you of the point we've already made? John is writing now to tell them, to reassure them, that though they be but babes, they are forgiven babes, and they are babes who know the Father.

He's not questioning their faith at all, he's confirming it. Now then, what does he say to them? Three things need comment about this twofold message to the babes of Christ. Every spiritual child, every Christian has received the forgiveness of sin.

In addressing babes, John is now speaking to the most immature in the church. Everybody will agree with that. It includes the least mature.

But John says to the least mature in the church, your sins have been forgiven you. Which is another way of saying that to be a true member of the church, not just a mature member of necessity, but to be a member of the church of God at all, you need to know your sins forgiven. Every member of the church, the babe in Christ, is a forgiven babe.

In other words, then, forgiveness of sins is not something that comes with maturity. Forgiveness of sins belongs to the very essence of church membership. By the use of the perfect tense, John refers to an act in the past whose consequence continues to be felt in the present.

In other words, they were forgiven back there somewhere, and they continue to be in a forgiven state because God does not withdraw what once he's given. Your sins are forgiven you, for his name's sake. Now, Christian, let's take this this morning.

If you are a true Christian, then the word of God would come to you with this comfort. Your sins are forgiven you. Believe what God says.

If you come in penitence and with faith to Jesus Christ, then he forgives your sins. I find this tremendously exciting that every Christian man and woman is forgiven of God, and we need to see one another in this way. All of us have a past.

All of us have transgressed. All of us have turned like sheep our own way, and we have sinned and sinned. And there are no exceptions.

But God has forgiven us if we're his. And we should look upon one another as forgiven men and women who bear the marks of the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Now, every Christian, even in this state of

babyhood, is also a person who knows the Father.

Look what John says. I have written to you, little children, because you have known the Father. Again, this is something that is true of every Christian.

This is challenging, of course. The knowledge of God is open to development. There is the knowledge of a child, but there is the knowledge of the fathers, which will be greater, as we shall see in a moment.

But both come into the same category. There is no such a person as a Christian who doesn't know the Father. Paul puts it like this.

The moment we are received into the family of God, God sends forth the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Now, that's a feature that you will find wherever there is a person who becomes a Christian. God's Spirit introduces him to the Father.

It was said of Saul of Tarsus, Behold, he prayeth. Now, that's no simple incident. Saul of Tarsus, the man who tore the church to shreds.

He's praying. What does it mean? It means this. He's become a child of God.

He knows the Father. And every Christian knows the Father. It's like this.

If I may dare to assume the kind of imagery behind John's words, it's something like this. At one moment in our lives, there is a vast, impenetrable wall between us and God. It's the wall of sin.

We talk of our iron curtain. Here is a far thicker curtain and more impenetrable. It's the curtain of sin between men and women and their God.

In our natural state and condition, there it is that we can't get through. God is unknown. We may reason about him, but we don't know him.

We may talk about him and argue about him, but we don't know him. The thick wall of sin stands between us and him. Then we are forgiven.

Forgiveness means the taking away of the wall. It says the Lord, I will cast your sins behind my back. I will cast them into the depths of the sea.

That's biblical language, not mine. And the psalmist responsibly says, as far as the east is from the west, so far as he removed our transgressions from us. Now you see the picture.

The wall is taken away. And the believer comes near to his God. You who sometime were afar, says Paul, are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

So near that I can speak to him as my father and begin to know him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent, the knowledge of God. Now every believer has got that in measure.

I can't rush through this, even if I don't finish what I have to this morning, but you know John has a wonderful way of teaching here. How is it that every Christian has got a knowledge of God? Well, because the sins are taken away. But that's not everything he says.

He uses two words for child or children. And they offer the key to an understanding of it. Two different words.

Now when John addresses them as children in the first place, in verse 12, he uses the word *technia*, which means that they are the begotten ones, begotten of God. Born again, if you like. But the stress is on this.

When this word is used, the stress is placed upon the community of nature, the community of nature between the begetter and the begotten. Between the father and the child. And when you speak of a child as a *technion*, which is the singular, you mean this, that he is one begotten of so and so, and there is this community of interest.

They are the same kind. They have the same nature. They have the same spirit.

Now John is saying, you *technia*, you know the father because you have the same nature as he has. He's given it to you. You're born again.

You have the same spirit. He's made you like himself and therefore you have the capacity to know him. I trust there is no one here this morning who doesn't know the experience of the rebirth.

Jesus said, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Seek it this morning, my friend, in your seat where you are. Seek it of God.

Ask him to work some miracle in your soul now if you don't know anything about it. The Christian has it. He has the nature of God within him and therefore you see, deep within calls to deep without.

A nature that is implanted at the rebirth is a nature that has kinship with God. God is my father. Then John uses another word which brings out the same truth but from a different point of view.

The other word he uses for child is the word *paideia*. This comes from a base which means to train or to educate or to discipline. Now the implication is this, you see.

John says you know the father because you are children in training by him. He's training you. He's your teacher.

He's disciplining you. He's chastising you and he's comforting you. He does everything for you that a father does for his child.

He's your trainer and because you're in training with the father, you get to know him. Because this is a daily matter. It does not happen every time you come to church.

The whole of life is the stage on which God trains us. And the child comes to know the father in the arena of training. Oh, these apostles knew how to get things across.

Now what does he say? This. You younger members of the Christian church, you not have time and opportunity to develop very much. You're just babes.

Now look, he says, let me assure you. I'm not questioning your faith at all by applying these tests. In fact, I come to comfort you.

I believe that the least Christian among you can rise up to pass these tests. To obey the commandment of God and to love your brethren. Why? Because your sins are forgiven you.

Because you know the father. Because you are children having his nature within you and being trained by him. I would like every young Christian here this morning to know something of this comfort.

As you look at the standards set by the word of God, oh, you may fear even as I fear and I'm sure everybody else. But you see, the Lord comes to us and says, look, I have made a new creature of you. And I've given you certain things and certain privileges and your relationship to myself is such.

By my grace you can. Because you're a child of mine. Now let's move to the second.

John's message to the spiritual fathers. I quote again from the New English Bible, the translation I believe is better. And the tenses are brought out so much the better.

The beginning of verse 13, I write to you fathers because you have known him who is and has been from the beginning. The beginning of verse 14, to you fathers I have written because you know him who is and has been from the beginning. Now the first surprise, there are two surprises here.

The first surprise is this. In turning from the little children to the fathers, from one end of the scale to the other, the apostle says almost the same thing to the fathers as he says to the children. One thing he said to the little babes was this.

You know the father. And the only thing he says to the fathers, the maturest Christian, is this. You know him that was from the beginning and continues to exist.

A father. Apart from what is involved in the title father, John hardly says anything new to these spiritually adult people. What is involved in the title father of course is this, that they in turn have given birth to spiritual children.

And they are exercising the ministry of parents spiritually within the church. That means so much of course. But then John only says to them, you know the father.

The characteristic feature of your life and experience is this. You know the father. Surprise indeed.

Let me put it to you like this. If you wanted to introduce, shall I say now, just purely for example, if you wanted to introduce to me some speaker, shall we say, and you'd like him to speak enough. Purely hypothetical.

I'm not hitting at anybody. Purely hypothetical. What would you say about him? How would you want to introduce him? What would be the greatest thing whereby you'd commend him? Can I answer? Dare I? Well you'd say he's a great speaker.

Great speaker. He's spoken to great crowds. He's had a large number of converts.

He's had great success. He's got a whole string of degrees. And he's good looking.

Very attractive in the pulpit. Got a lovely voice. He's not poorer than the rest.

All this is being said. You notice how John doesn't mention any of these things. The characteristic feature of a mature man of God is this.

And there's nothing more than this. He knows God. He knows his God.

And it shows the measure of our carnalities. When we condescend to stress anything over and above this. Oh, how often one has heard it.

We forget, you see, that any measure of success in the ministry or in any aspect of Christian work is the work of God, not of a man. I have planted, says Paul, a pollice as water. But it's God who gives the increase.

No man makes converts. That is, no man brings another to the place of rebirth. We may have results.

We may get men to make decisions. But we cannot regenerate other people. It's God who does that.

And if God doesn't do it, men remain dead in trespasses and sins. You see, you and I simply cannot assess maturity spiritually by the number of converts a person gets. Can I give you an extreme illustration of the kind of thing I mean? I think it's very important.

Paul is writing to the Philippians. And among other things he says there is this. Some preach Christ, he says, from envy and rivalry, out of partisanship.

Not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. I'm quoting from Philippians 2, 15-17. Choosing a few words, excerpts from there.

Now you notice what Paul is saying. Here are people who are troubling the church. They are jealous of the authority of the apostle and of the ministry of the apostle.

But how can they minimize the significance of the authority of the apostle in the church? You know what they do? They decide that they'll preach Christ. And they'll get converts. And by getting more and more converts, they'll confuse the apostle and confuse the people.

And thereby their own authority and their egoism develops. And they hope to gain followers. You see, Paul was right when he said, I planted Paul upon us water.

But it's God who gives the increase. We are neither one thing nor another, he says. Don't divide about us and don't pit us one against another.

There's nothing to any of us but what we've received. It is God who gives the increase. And sometimes God blesses His word when He can't bless the man that preaches the word.

Shall I tell you something from the depth of my soul? I know and I'm sure every other minister of the word knows that there have been times when God has blessed us, blessed others through our ministry when we've been most unworthy of it. There have been times when I have gone and hidden my face in shame that God has seen fit to save souls. And there have been things in my heart, if not in my outer life, that have been unworthy of Him.

But He does it, you see. He blesses His word when He doesn't bless the minister of the word or when the minister is unworthy of it. Now, all this is relevant to this.

What John says to the adults, the spiritual adults in the church is this. The most important thing I can say about you is this. There's nothing more I can say.

And that's the second surprise. You know the Father. There's no experience greater than this.

There is no peak in the Christian experience beyond this. And Paul had been living many a year in the ocean of God's grace and feasting upon the good things of God. You remember, he yet thirsted, writing the epistle to the Philippians from which we've got it.

Oh, he says that I might know Him in the power of His resurrection and in the fellowship of His sufferings. To know Him more and more and more. He knew Him already, of course.

Unless my other experiences, in quotes, result in the knowledge of God, they're in vain. This is the way we test everything, biblically. Does it lead to the knowledge of God or not? If it does not, it means it's not very important.

If it does, it comes within the orbit of the great things of Scripture. There is nothing beyond this. Such advanced knowledge then as the fathers have, albeit nothing but knowledge of God, it makes babes into fathers, makes dependents into dependable guardians of others, makes the feeble toddler into a stable and dependable follower of Christ, makes the child of faith into a faithful, dependable, and loyal father of others.

The ancient Spartans used to point to their citizens and say, Our citizens are the walls of our city. We must point and can point to the fathers in the church of Jesus Christ, the spiritual, and say they are the defense of the church from evil from without and evil from within. Mature saints.

And lastly, John's message to the young men. I can only refer to it. I write to you young men because you have mastered the evil one.

And again, to you young men, I have written because your strong God's word remains in you and you have mastered the evil one. Now, the thing that stands out in this group is that they're not only strong, but they've already proved their strength. They are strong.

They're idle spiritually. And they've proved their strength in overcoming the evil one. Now, I don't know what John is referring to.

Perhaps it is in taking an initial stand for Jesus Christ. In bearing their witness in the first place in a pagan city. They've taken their stand and they've acknowledged him to be Savior and Lord in a pagan world.

Don't you know that means something? Maybe that John was referring to that. I cannot tell you. But the point is, they have proved themselves to have strength to overcome the enemy of souls, Savior.

They have done so, says John, as an apostle of Jesus Christ. There are contests behind them and they've come out on top. In other words, they have defined grace.

They have defined power. They have energy from God. They've proved it by their past experience.

But, what John wants to say to them very especially is this. Not only have you got power and you've proved that you had it in the past. But what thrills me is this.

That the Word of God abides in you. That the source of power that gave you victory yesterday remains in you. Abides in you to give you victory tomorrow.

John knew that there is only one way of overcoming the evil one. It's by the Word of God. By the blood of the Lamb and the Word of our testimony.

He says that in the book of the Revelation. That was the testimony of our Lord Jesus. He only used one weapon to overcome the evil one.

It is the Word of God. It's the Word of God. Now, says John, what thrills me is this.

And I comfort you, you young men in the church. You people who are between the beds and the fathers. I want to comfort you with this.

I know, he says, I've been watching you. I know that the Word of God is abiding in you. It's got into you.

Into your minds. Into your hearts. Into your souls.

And I know it's abiding there. Therefore, he says, you can surely overcome tomorrow as you did yesterday. I'm so hopeful of you.

I'm applying these tests. But I know you'll come out on top. You don't need to worry because the Word of God abides in you.

My good friends, is the Word of God abiding in us today? How much do we carry away from the Word of God? I don't mean simply now in the house of God, in the sanctuary, in public worship. How much of the Word of God do you take with you into your office, into your school every day? How much of it abides in your mind, even in your memory? Or if not there in your subconscious, that you can call it up when it's necessary. And use it as the Lord Jesus did when there was need, when the evil one comes.

Has the Word of God come to lodge and come to live in you so that it is always a power in the subconscious? Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee, says the psalmist. Or, you know it applies equally so to the service of the church. How much of the Word of God do we discipline and train ourselves to take away? There is only one source of hope for victorious Christian living, says John here.

It is this, that the Word of God abides in us. For if the Word abides in us, it will inspire us and enable us to walk in the ways of the commandments, to love the brethren, and to do anything that God requires of us. The world within us will burn and enable.

Thus would the wise apostle correct any possible confusion arising from his teaching. He's not doubting the genuineness of anyone within the church. He's not doubting the genuineness of anyone there, and he comforts them, reassuring them.

Even the babes in Christ, they have the essentials of the Christian experience. And he says how hopeful he is in each case. But here in the case of the young men, because the Word of God abides in them.

You see, when you're young, you have so much to think about. One thinks about one's life opening up. What am I going to do? Where am I going to work? How am I going to get a living? Where am I going to get my wife from or my husband from? You know, all the things that come clattering into the mind and fill the mind.

But says John, I see something remaining in you. In the midst of all the other concerns, and the concern is this. The thing that remains is this.

The Word of God in you. Could John be equally sure of us? He writes his epistle then not to cause a genuine believer to doubt, but rather to hope. I urge you, my good people, with me this morning, come and let us let the Word of God dwell in us richly, as Paul says in writing to the Colossians.

Let the Word of God dwell in you richly. It's a wonderful word. Abide in you.

And as it abides in you, impart its riches to your mind. Its riches to your will. Its riches to your understanding.

Its riches to your emotions. Its riches to the whole of your inner life, that you may become rich as you become strong. Oh, may the Spirit of God so lead us that the tests of faith do not confuse us.

Comfort us. Enable us in the eyes of the astute believer to come out as those who are evidently the Lord. Thereby have an ever-deepening fellowship of one with the other, and all of us with the Father.

God bless His Word to us, to His glory, to our well-being. Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, we glorify Thy holy name, that the teaching of Scripture is so precious and so adequate.

Forgive us, our Lord, that we so often live on little tidbits and odd little passages of it, when Thou hast given us such a vast territory, such a vast resource to grow from. We pray this morning that this passage of Scripture, which is called a digression by some of Thy servants, may perform in us a ministry that will be to our good and to Thy glory. May it minister grace to our souls, through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Amen.

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