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1 John 2:12-17

Fourth Message

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# GROWING IN GRACE AND STRENGTH

*SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT*

Have you ever been misunderstood? Perhaps something you said did not come out exactly the way you wanted, or maybe someone took something you said and twisted it to mean something you never intended. Faulty communication can occasionally be humorous, especially when we catch it in print. Perhaps you have even caught a few typographical errors in our church bulletins. Here are a few mistakes that have come across my desk in church bulletins:

- “This afternoon there will be a meeting in the north and south ends of the church. Children will be baptized at both ends.”
- “This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Franklin to come forward before the offering and lay an egg on the altar.”
- “On Wednesday, the Ladies Literary Society will meet. Mrs. Willard will sing ‘Put Me in My Little Bed,’ accompanied by the Reverend.”

Sometimes our mistakes are corrected by greater mistakes. Listen to this comedy of errors that actually appeared in a newspaper several years ago. On the first day, the advertisement read:

FOR SALE—R. D. Jones has one sewing machine for sale. Phone 958-3030 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him cheap.

On the next day the ad was “corrected” by the newspaper to read:

NOTICE—We regret having erred in R. D. Jones’ ad yesterday. It should have read: One sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 958-3030 and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him after 7 p.m.

The correction was “corrected” the day after:

R. D. Jones has informed us that he received several anonymous telephone phone calls because of the error we made in the classified ad yesterday. His ad stands corrected as follows:

FOR SALE—R. D. Jones has one sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 958-3030 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Kelly who loves with him.

Finally, Mr. Jones corrected the ad himself with a second ad:

NOTICE—I, R. D. Jones, have no sewing machine for sale. I SMASHED IT. Don’t call 958-3030 as the telephone has been taken out. I have not been carrying on with Mrs. Kelly. Until yesterday she was my housekeeper, but SHE QUIT.

Poor guy! He not only lost his sale, he lost his help.

Fortunately for the apostle John, there is no error in his communication. There are no typos in his epistle. However, he is deeply concerned about faulty communication. John has been discussing the tests by which the presence of the life of God within an individual can be discerned, and conversely he has spoken of those in whom it is not present. At times, his words have been harsh. He has said that those who profess to know God but who fail to obey his laws are liars. He has added that those who say they love God but

fail to love their brothers are walking in the dark, and do not know where they are going.

What would be the reaction of John’s readers to these words? Maybe they reacted as some of you have in the past weeks. We can imagine that some of them took these words personally, admitting that at times they did not obey God, that they did not love one another. Surely some would have wondered if they were truly born again. But this is not how John wants them to think. In fact, he is writing his letter not to increase their doubt but to strengthen their assurance.

Thus, he interrupts his presentation of the tests to direct a personal word to his readers. First, he assures them, in spite of what he has said, that he has no doubt of their having come to a knowledge of God. In fact, it is because they know God, rather than not knowing him, that he is writing to them. It is the false teachers whom he regards as spurious, not the loyal members of the church. After that word of assurance, he offers a word of warning which reveals the way in which his remarks *are* to be taken by Christians.

The word of assurance is given in verses 12-14, the warning in verses 15-17. Let us examine first John’s word of assurance.

## I. A Word of Assurance to the Church (2:12-14)

**I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name sake. 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. 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. (1 John 2:12-14 NASB)**

In six parallel statements, John addresses three groups of Christians using the terminology of a family—children, young men, and fathers. However, he is not referring to actual groups of people but to different stages of spiritual life. They have no relation to physical age or sex, but to spiritual development in a Christian’s life—the innocence of childhood, the strength of youth, and the mature knowledge of age. The “little children” are the newborn in Christ. The “young men” are more developed Christians, strong and victorious in spiritual warfare, and the “fathers” possess the depth and stability of Christian experience.

It is significant that in each of these six statements the verb is in the perfect tense which indicates the present consequence of a past event. John is emphasizing the assured standing which every Christian has, regardless of his stage of spiritual development. In fact, I believe John’s point in these verses is this:

## As Christians, We Are Assured of God's Love at Every Stage of Growth

*As Children, We Experience His Forgiveness*—John says, “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name sake,” and secondly, “I have written to you, children, because you know the Father.” These are the earliest conscious experiences of the newborn Christian. He rejoices in the forgiveness of his sins through Christ and in his consequent fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit within him makes him aware of his sonship and causes him to cry, “Abba! Father!”

Although this is true of all Christians at all stages of development, it is the first fact that we are aware of as believers. There is the lifting of the load of guilt, the solving of the problem of destiny, the awareness of the wonderful fact of the forgiveness of sins. John Bunyan describes this well in *Pilgrim's Progress* when Christian struggles through the Slough of Despond. He is terribly discouraged having the great burden of guilt on his back. Then he sees a cross far in the distance. As he approaches it, he feels the burden roll off his back and experiences release and freedom.

I vividly remember that experience in my own life. I grew up in a nominally religious home. I always believed in a God, but it never had much effect in my life. I had a fear of God but no knowledge of his love and provision. It was not until I was in college that a friend invited me to church and gave me a New Testament to read. As I read it, I was overwhelmed by the person of Jesus Christ and his love for me. How well I remember the evening in January 1970 at a Campus Crusade meeting on the campus of Whittier College when I asked Jesus Christ to come into my life! As I did so, I remember the joy I experienced in knowing that my sins were forgiven. There was such freedom inside my heart. Having never had a father growing up, it was especially meaningful to me that God was no longer an stern, austere judge, but a loving heavenly Father.

There is such a wonderful innocence about infancy! It does not matter that infants demand so much attention and are so self-centered—everyone is thrilled with new life. Having a newborn around our house, I know the joy they bring to a family. Although little Timothy contributes nothing to the running of our household at this point, there is joy in knowing he is a part of our family. And the fact that he knows his daddy is good enough for me! This is John's point: children know their Father.

Now John moves on to the other end of the growth process, to the fully mature Christians—the fathers.

*As Fathers, We Experience His Intimacy*—Fathers are the spiritual adults in the congregation. Their first flush of ecstasy in receiving forgiveness of sins and fellowship with the Father is long past. Even the battles of the young men, to which John will refer next, are past. The fathers have passed into a deep communion with God. Although children also know the Father, those who have spent many years with the Lord know him as He who is “from the beginning,” referring to the eternal God who does not change with advancing years, as men do, but who is forever the same.

The fathers have spent many years in fellowship with God, and they have seen his faithfulness through all the seasons of life. There is a stability that this long fellowship produces, and their deep joy is found in knowing and loving this God whom they have served. They are already consciously living in eternity.

I value the spiritual fathers in our congregation, and the stability these men and women have produced in our fellowship. I would like to publicly thank you for the faithful model you are of our loving heavenly Father.

The third group is the young men.

*As Young Men, We Experience His Power*—In between the children and fathers, this group is busily involved in the battle of Christian living. As most of us know, the Christian life is not just enjoying the forgiveness and fellowship of God. It also involves fighting the enemy. The forgiveness of past sins must be followed by deliverance from sin's present power; justification must be followed by sanctification. The distinctive mark of this group, John says, is that they have overcome the devil. They are strong, and in Christ they are able to meet all of Satan's attacks. Their conflict has become a conquest.

Notice that the secret of the young men's strength is given in the phrase “the word of God abides in you.” They have grasped the truth. They both understand and have submitted their lives to the Scriptures. Maybe John had in mind Psalm 119:9, 11:

**How can a young man keep his way pure,  
By keeping it according to Thy word...  
Thy word have I treasured in my heart,  
That I might not sin against Thee.**

It was John who wrote in the twelfth chapter of Revelation, “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” These victors have learned to handle “the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.”

This is an important word for us who are in the battle. Some of you need to leave the comfortable stage of childhood where you are enjoying the forgiveness and knowledge of God because that is not all there is to the Christian life. God has made provision for you to grow strong. Jesus told us, “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God.” This book, the Bible, will help you grow. You need to understand it, submit to it, discover your spiritual gifts, and take your place in the battle.

At whatever stage we find ourselves, whether child, young man or father, we can be assured of our standing before God and of his unconditional love. What a wonderful comfort that is! We never need to fear growing up. God's provisions are reliable, and he will take us through every stage, always giving us what we need to grow.

I love the story, recorded in Charles Swindoll's book *Living on the Ragged Edge*, which Charles Allen tells of John Todd, born in 1800 in Vermont. By the time John was six, both of his parents had died. When the children were parceled out to relatives, a kind-hearted aunt agreed to take John. He lived with her for fifteen years until he left to study for the ministry. Many years later, he received word that she was dying. When she wrote and asked him what death would be like, this was John's reply:

It is now thirty-five years since I, a little boy of six, was left quite alone in the world. You sent me word you would give me a home and be a kind mother to me. I have never forgotten the day when I made the long journey of ten miles to your house in North Killingsworth. I can still recall my disappointment when, instead of coming for me yourself, you sent your colored man, Caesar, to fetch me. I well remember my tears and my anxiety as, perched high on your horse and clinging tight to Caesar, I rode off to my new home. Night fell before we finished the journey and as it grew dark, I became lonely and afraid.

“Do you think she’ll go to bed before I get there?” I asked Caesar anxiously. “Oh no,” he said reassuringly. “She’ll sure stay up for you. When we get out of these here woods you’ll see her candle shining in the window.” Presently we did ride out in the clearing and there, sure enough, was your candle. I remember you were waiting at the door, that you put your arms close about me and that you lifted me—a tired and bewildered little boy—down from the horse. You had a big fire burning on the hearth, a hot supper waiting for me on the stove. After supper, you took me to my new room, you heard me say my prayers and then you sat beside me until I fell asleep.

You probably realize why I am recalling all this to your memory. Some day soon, God will send for you, to take you to a new home. Don’t fear the summons—the strange journey—or the dark messenger of death. God can be trusted to do as much for you as you were kind enough to do for me so many years ago. At the end of the road you will find love and a welcome waiting, and you will be safe in God’s care. I shall watch you and pray for you until you are out of sight, and then wait for the day when I shall make the journey myself and find you waiting at the end of the road to greet me.

In other words, John Todd was saying, “Don’t worry, Auntie, you are expected. I know for sure because I saw God standing in your doorway a long time ago.” That is also John’s word of assurance to his readers: “I have seen God in your lives. Don’t fear the path, no matter what stage you are in; God can be trusted.”

Although we have entered into a great inheritance in the forgiveness of sins, fellowship with God, and victory over the evil one, we know that our temptations have not come to end. John now shifts from a word of affirmation to a word of warning in verses 15-17.

## II. A Word of Warning Concerning the World (2:15-17)

**Do not love the world, nor 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 lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever. (2:15-17)**

John now turns from a description of the church to a description of the world and instruction about the church’s attitude toward it. John’s principle is this:

### As Christians, We Must Be Careful that the Father’s Love Remains Foremost in Our Affections

John’s command to us is “Do not love the world.” To what is he referring? The word *kosmos* is used in different ways in the New Testament. In John 1:10, “world” refers to the universe, which is the word’s basic meaning. In the early history of the Greek language, *kosmos* meant “ornament.” This meaning is preserved in our word “cosmetic.” Later, the “universe” became the “ornament” of God. Later on, the word came to denote the world of men as in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...”

Later, the word developed an ethical dimension which is the most common use of the word in John’s writings and is the use referred to in this passage. This pictures the world of men in rebellion against God and therefore characterized by all that is in opposition to God. This is what we might call “the world system.” It involves the world’s values and priorities, its pleasures and pastimes.

Viewed as people, the world must be loved. Viewed as an evil system organized under the dominion of Satan, it is not to be loved. John says if there was anything in the world which was of the Father,

then we might love it. But since “all that is in the world...is from the world,” we are not to love any of it. To make his point, John selects three elements which characterize the world.

First, he names “the lust of the flesh.” The flesh here refers not to our bodies, per se, but to our fallen and sinful nature. The NIV translates this “the cravings of sinful man.” Thus, the flesh refers to the sinful tendencies which are present in the body. God has given us certain desires which are good: hunger, thirst, rest and sex. But when the sinful nature controls these desires, it always wants more or seeks to satisfy them in ways that are harmful. Barclay notes, “It is to live a life which is dominated by the senses. It is to be gluttonous in food, effeminate in luxury, slavish in pleasure, lax in morals, selfish in the use of possessions, extravagant in the gratification of worldly, earthly, and material desires.”

Second, John names the “lust of the eyes.” This indicates the temptations which assault us not from within but from without. Our eyes can have an appetite as well. Have you ever said, “Feast your eyes on this”? The lust of the eyes is the tendency to be captivated by the outward show of things without inquiring into their real value. As one man noted, “It will include the love of beauty without the love of goodness.” Eve’s view of the forbidden tree as a “delight to the eyes” reflects this lust. David experienced the same lust when he looked over his balcony and saw Bathsheba bathing.

Finally, John refers to the “boastful pride of life.” This refers to an arrogance or vainglory about one’s external circumstances, whether wealth, rank or dress. “Pretentious ostentation” would be a good summary for this phrase. This pride is the attitude of arrogance derived from acquiring things. We see this every day in our valley and in our own lives.

To love the world is to be preoccupied with physical and sensual pleasures. To love the world is to be preoccupied with the temporal instead of the eternal. To love the world is to be preoccupied with ourselves and our own needs instead of the needs of others.

We can misinterpret these verses as some have, to think that our sexuality is evil or that having and enjoying nice things is wrong. This would certainly miss the point of this passage. We are told elsewhere in Scripture that “God has given us all things richly to enjoy.” The warning here is concerning our affections which can be so easily deceived.

In exhorting his readers not to love the world, John also reveals two critical and searching reasons why this is the only sane choice.

### A. The Love of the World and the Love of the Father are Mutually Exclusive

John says, “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” He is not saying that we should not love both, but that it is impossible. You can not do both—It is one or the other. Jesus put it this way: “No man can serve two masters.” We are only deceiving ourselves if we think we can. We were made to be mastered by someone, and that someone is either the world, which is the channel and activity of the evil one, or God. James tells us that “friendship with the world is enmity against God.” Paul tells us in 2 Timothy that one of the marks of the last days is that men will be “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”

These two loves are mutually exclusive and absolutely antagonistic ideas. It is a deceitful message that can creep into our mind, and before we know it, we think we can have the best of both worlds. We cannot. Both forces promise to satisfy us and give us rich, full lives.

One is telling a lie, the other the truth. One thing is certain—we must make a choice. Martha Snell Nicholson's words ring true:

One by one God took them from me,  
All the things I value most,  
Till I was empty-handed,  
Every glittering toy was lost.

And I walked earth's highway grieving  
In my rags and poverty  
Till I heard His inviting  
"Lift those empty hands to Me."

So I turned my hand toward heaven,  
And He filled them with a store  
Of His own transcendent riches  
Till I could contain no more.

At last I comprehended  
With my stupid mind and dull  
That God could not pour out His riches  
Into hands already full.

The love of the world and the love of the Father are mutually exclusive. There is a second reason given to us in verse 17.

#### **B. The World is Transitory and Headed for Destruction**

John says, "And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever." Do you know what? The one who dies with the most toys does not win! Do not live for this world. Do not love its glory, seek its fame, or consider important the things it can give. Do not cling to these so desperately, letting your emotions get wrapped up in them. Hold them loosely, or as Corrie Ten Boom reminds us, God will have to pry your fingers loose.

If we want to get the most out of life, we must learn to give priority to the things that are important. Pepsi does not give us life. Buicks are not something to believe in. Lowenbrau does not bring us good friends. Jim Elliot, the missionary who died at the hands of the Aucas Indians, penned words that echo the point John is making, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

As we plan to celebrate Christmas with our families, I urge us to enter this season with our priorities clear and our affections fixed on the things that matter. We will be bombarded by a marketing strategy that appeals to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life.

I was recently reminded about focusing on things that are lasting when I read about playwright Moss Hart's childhood experience that occurred one Christmas. Let me close with his words found in *Creative Brooding* by Robert Raines:

We hurried on, our heads bent against the wind, to the cluster of lights ahead that was 149th Street and Winchester Avenue, and those lights seemed to me to be the brightest lights I had ever seen. Tugging at my father's coat, I started down the line of pushcarts...I would merely pause before a pushcart to say, with as much control as I could muster, "Look at that chemistry set!" or, "There's a stamp album!" or, "Look at the printing press!"

Each time my father would pause and ask the pushcart man the price. Then without a word we would move on the next pushcart. Once or twice he would pick up a toy of some kind and look at it and then at me, as if to suggest this might be something I might like, but I was ten years old and a good deal beyond just a toy; my heart was set on a chemistry set or a printing press. There they were on every pushcart we stopped at, but the price was always the same and soon I looked up and saw we were nearing the end of the line. Only two or more pushcarts remained. My father looked up too, and I heard him jingle some coins in his pocket. In a flash I knew it all. He'd gotten together about seventy-five cents to buy me a Christmas present, and he hadn't dare say so in case there was nothing to be had for so small a sum.

As I looked up at him I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes that brought me closer to him than I have ever been in my life. I wanted to throw my arms around and say, "It doesn't matter...I understand...This is better than a chemistry set or a printing press... I love you." But instead we stood shivering beside each other for a moment—then turned away from the last two pushcarts and started silently back home...I didn't even take his hand on the way home nor did he take mine. We were not on that basis. Nor did I ever tell him I close I felt to him that night—that for a little while the concrete wall between father and son had crumbled away and I knew that we were two lonely people struggling to reach each other.

It seems amazing to us that a father and son could stand side by side like statues on that cold, windy day, shivering and silent. But that look of despair need not be in our eyes because we can be assured of the love of the Father and know his love at every stage of life. But we also need to be warned because the love of the world is a deceiving threat to the love of the Father. Let us be sure that we have our affections in order as we go into the Christmas season, assured of our Heavenly Father's love, and always careful to keep that love foremost in our hearts.

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