

## **Godly Strengthening**

### **1 John 2:12-14**

#### **Introduction**

In our current culture, affirmation is a big deal. Affirmation itself is not inherently good or bad. The word means “to strengthen,” and we use it to mean strengthening in or for or toward something. So, we must ask, what is the direction of the affirmation? What is its end? What are we affirming someone, or being affirmed, in or toward? In this passage, John pauses in his letter and strengthens his readers toward standing in Christ.

#### **Little Children, Fathers, and Young Men**

There are two questions that we should first answer as we come to this text: 1) who are the different groups John addresses, and 2) how does this connect with what comes before (or after)? There are varying opinions regarding whom John is addressing in these poetic verses. Is he identifying different groups by age? Is he identifying different levels of maturity among the believers? Is it some combination of these? Is he addressing, not different individuals, but different aspects of their relationship to the gospel? In my opinion, this last makes the most sense, though not to the exclusion of other views. “They are ‘children’ because with the forgiveness of sins they have been welcomed into the family of God their Father. They are ‘fathers’ because their knowledge of God in Jesus Christ qualifies them to hand this knowledge down to future generations. They are called ‘young men’ because their decisive rejection of the evil one is a victory like that of Jesus...” (*The Reformation Study Bible*).

How does this passage connect to the previous section? In many ways, John’s letter is a letter of assurance, encouraging believers to confidently walk in the light. In the previous passages, he has given some tests for assurance and rebuked some false teachings: the true testimony to the gospel (1:1-4); agreeing with God about our sin and walking in the light (1:5-10); obedience to the commands of God (2:3-5); walking like Christ walked (2:6); loving your brother (2:10). Here, it seems that John pauses and seeks to simply bolster the confidence and assurance of the sheep he is writing to. In each stanza, John says, “I write to you because,” and then he ties his audience to the gospel in some way.

#### **A Tangent on Gender**

If John is not addressing fathers and young men specifically (as I do not think he is), then in our current climate we should anticipate this question: shouldn’t we use more “gender inclusive” terms? Isn’t it a little discriminatory or demeaning of women to only use the masculine terms? Frankly, no, it is not. The Almighty, All-knowing, All-good Father often uses masculine terms in His revelation of His redemption for us to include both men and women. And, He does this, having particularly chosen the time and place and language in which these things were to occur (cf. Gal. 3:26-4:7).

#### **Forgiven and Knowing the Father**

John addresses the believers as little children, reminding them of their adoption into God’s family. And he emphasizes to them that they are forgiven. As adopted children of the Father, we need to be reminded of this constantly. Especially in a church that faithfully proclaims what the Scriptures say, that is not afraid to call sin for what it is, it is imperative

that the congregation hear these words: you are forgiven. Every week, as you come here, you are confronted with your sin towards the beginning of the service. This is right and good because we are coming into the presence of the most Holy God. But you also need to hear the words of absolution: your sins are forgiven you for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ. This is important as well for you to remember as you come before the preaching of the Word. In God's mercy, His Word reveals to us places we need to deal with our sin, sins that we need to acknowledge and confess. But even so, you need to hear that your sins are forgiven. Even before you confess them, Christ has paid for them if you are in Him. And so John also reminds these children that they have known the Father, having received and experienced His love and grace toward them.

### **Knowing Christ**

John secondly addresses the believers as fathers, and he writes to them as such because they too have known Him who is from the beginning—that is, Jesus (cf. 1:1). They have known and experience the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and having done so, they are equipped as fathers to disciple the nations, teaching them to observe all that Christ commands, teaching them to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength (cf. Deut. 6:7, Josh. 24:15). If you have known Jesus, then you are equipped to do the work of ministry. Is there more equipping that can and should be done? Absolutely. Still, if all you have and all you know is that your sins are forgiven because you know Jesus, then you have something to give and pass on. In fact, it is this practice of using what you have that God uses to grow us into more and more knowledge, ability, and maturity (Heb. 5:14).

### **Strong, Indwelt, and Victorious**

Lastly, John addresses the church as young men. Initially, John's reason is simply that they have overcome the wicked one. When he repeats this address, he first calls them strong (cf. Prov. 20:29). The next two lines can be seen like this: You are strong because the Word of God abides in you, and I know you to be strong because you have overcome the wicked one. Notice that John does not say that they are in the process of overcoming the wicked one. It has already happened. This is because it has been accomplished by Christ. He is the victor, and Christians, as they walk as He walked (2:6), walk as victors themselves. The victory is decided, though there are still some continuing effects as we wait for God to complete the work He has begun (Phil. 1:6). But His work in us has begun with Christ's victory.

### **Conclusion**

John writes this fatherly letter of encouragement, exhortation, and assurance to believers because of the things they already are and already know. In this, he is an example to us. There is an onslaught of ungodly affirmation even within the church. We should counter it by imitating John, affirming to one another the glories and strengths of our redemption. John's letter contains plenty of exhortation, rebuke, warnings, and calls to walk in the light and flee darkness. But wrapped up in the midst of all of it is godly, Christ-centered affirmation, reminding Christians of Whose they are. This is what faithful counsel is—calling one another back to the basic truths. You have been forgiven. You know Jesus. In Him, you have overcome the wicked one. You know the Father. You know Jesus. You are strong because Christ is with you, and so you have overcome the wicked one.