

First John (8) - The Church And The World

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 0 0] Chapter 2, verses 12 to 17. I'm not going to read through it again. We're going to look at that passage this evening. We'll come in our studies of John to something of what you might call a digression or a sidestep, because we've seen how he's described some of the elements of these assessments or tests that he's setting out by way of the teaching that he's giving to them against false teachers that they are confronted with in their time.

And we've tried to look at how that's appropriate for our own circumstances today as well. As he comes now to this digression in verses 12 to 17, he comes to pause, if you like, or give them an opportunity to reflect upon those things that he's already said to them.

Something a bit like if you're walking, you're out for a walk, and especially if you're walking up a hill, then sometimes you stop or take a breather, but very often you'll look back, and you'll look back over the territory that you've already covered, and you'll stop perhaps for a while and take it in, and you'll maybe say, well, yes, I remember now I walked through that, but I can see it now from this height, and I can reflect upon that.

So something like that he's doing in a literal sense as he's coming to this digression or this sidestep. And there are two topics within this passage, verses 12 to 14.

You can see that there's then another heading there, but verses 12 to 14 deal with the church, their own fellowship, what they consist of as a people that he's writing to.

[1 : 3 8] And then verses 15 to 17 speaks largely about the world, and especially the relation that they must have with the world, or how they must view the world and the things of the world.

In other words, he's really giving them an opportunity to reflect upon who they are and what they are as the family of God, as God's church in the world.

Secondly, in verses 15 to 17, in that relation to the world, it's really just saying this is how you must live in relation to the world.

We'll see something of what he means by the world when we come to it. But these are the two things, really, that he's setting out for us here. What we are and who we are as God's people, as God's family, and how we relate to the world, especially as we see the world defined by John as an entity that's opposed to God and opposed to the gospel.

And it's important that we take them together. There's a lot in the passage. I don't want to rush through it, but I want to try and cover both of these sections because there is an important relationship between what he says of the church here and what he says of the world and the relation between them.

[2 : 5 4] So let's see if we can cover it as quickly as possible, but not necessarily in too much of a hurry. So first of all, he wants them to realize and to dwell upon the fact that they are God's family, that they are indeed God's own family.

And he mentions three categories. He speaks about little children or children. He speaks about fathers, and he speaks about young men. Of course, when he's saying all of that, it doesn't at all exclude females.

The Bible often will speak in the masculine, but very obviously not excluding those who are women or girls from what he is saying. Every congregation has that combination, and the Bible is equally addressed to both.

That's true of this passage as well. They are God's family in these three categories. Now, commentators have taken these verses in different ways.

Some have taken it that children means the whole company, and then that he divides that up into fathers and young men. So that he's addressing the whole company, and then he's dividing it into a certain section of them, as fathers that he calls fathers, and another section as young men.

[4 : 13] I'm not taking it that way. There's, I think, a better way of dealing with it. You can't be absolutely dogmatic about this, but I'm following another interpretation of it, which sees that these three categories are not categories of age, but they're categories, if you like, in terms of experience as Christians.

They're spiritual experience. Where they're actually at in terms of belonging to the church, so that some of them, as he calls them little children, are the most immature, or if you like, maybe the newly converted, or those who are just fairly new to the Christian faith.

We can take it in that way, that that's what he means by children, or by little children. He uses both terms. And then when he comes to speak about fathers, we're taking that as the more mature members of the congregation, not just males, not just fathers as the heads of households, or whatever, but in terms of those who are advanced in their Christian experience.

He's calling them fathers because they have that advancement, and also they're in a position of passing on what they know to those who are coming after them. So there's that category of those who are more experienced, and he's writing to them.

And then he's writing to young men as well. As we say, remember, this includes women as well. And it seems that we can take this, at least this is how we're taking it, that he means those who are presently, if you like, in the full vigor of Christian activity.

[5 : 48] Because very often when we reach a later maturity, certainly a maturity in years, we tend not perhaps to have the same energy. And so these young men, this is the category of this congregation or this church that are really involved zealously, and have actually overcome the evil one, and actually have the word of God abiding in them.

And verse 13, because you have overcome the evil one. And that's the way we're taking it, just to map it out for you this evening. So let's follow these categories as we find them.

They're repeated. There's mentions that each of them twice. So what we're going to do is just take each of them in the double references that are there, taking the little children, what he says about them twice, the fathers, what he says about them twice, and then the young men, and what he says about them twice as well.

So he begins with, I'm writing to you little children. And then verse 13, I'm writing to you children. They're young in the faith. Indeed, you could say that this church itself was not all that long established in the faith, but already there are some of them that are more advanced than others, and there are some of them that are new to the faith, some of them that are newly born spiritually, and therefore need to be led, and need to be taught by those who are more advanced.

And that, of course, is such a significant part, such a significant feature as it should be, at least of every congregation. Even if you are older in years tonight, doesn't mean that you're not amongst the young ones spiritually.

[7 : 26] And every congregation needs the combination of those categories, people who are just born again, people who are more advanced in the faith, people who are zealous and energetic for the Lord, whatever age they're at in literal age.

And that's one thing we need constantly to be praying for, that we will have more people who are born again, more people coming to know the Lord, more people coming to be converted, more people coming to give their lives to the Lord, coming to be changed by God himself.

So he's writing to these little children. The two things that he's saying to them, I'm writing to you little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

And then in verse 13, I write to you, because you know the Father. So the first thing is, your sins have been forgiven, is literally what it says. Because your sins are forgiven, yes, but he's also saying they were forgiven, and they remain forgiven.

And you can see how that fits with the newly begun Christian, or the very outset of the Christian life, because that is one of the things that really is a feature of the beginnings of your Christian pilgrimage.

[8 : 39] You haven't come to be concerned about your sins after a number of years following Christ, after a number of years since your conversion. This is something that God actually brought you to know your need of, and your prayer for, at the very outset of his work in your life, if you're a Christian tonight.

This was your concern, and this has been something that is a concern as God brings us to know ourselves, and brings us to know himself. It happens at the outset of your Christian life.

Because if you're here tonight, and your sin has not been forgiven, well, that's such a serious matter. You can't begin the Christian life, the Christian walk. You can begin it in the sense of intellectually appreciative of the gospel, but you can't begin it actually in living your life as a Christian, except as your sins are forgiven.

It's part, really, of the very threshold into salvation, that God forgives our sins. You look at the teaching of Jesus in the gospel, the teaching of John the Baptist, as the gospel is recorded.

He came into, as a preparer of the way for Jesus, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness, or remission of sins. Jesus himself, so often mentioned forgiveness as being such an important feature of knowing him as Savior.

[10 : 01] We come, as we saw earlier in the study of John, where we saw as one of the tests that by this, he says that, where he says, if anyone sin, we have an advocate with the Father.

And before that, he had said, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So when you come to have sin impressed upon your mind and spirit as something that is really serious, something that is between yourself and God, something that needs to be dealt with, something that needs to be dealt with by taking that guilt of your sin out of the way, by taking this barrier to fellowship with God out of the way, you come to ask his forgiveness.

You come to plead that God will forgive your sins, that God will actually take away this, the sin that comes between you and himself and the guilt of that sin.

Now that we come daily to ask for forgiveness of sin, but there's something at the very outset that really is foundational in our experience of salvation, that we come with our sin, we confess our sin, we bring before God our own sense of sinfulness, of sinning against him, of being guilty as he sees us in our sins.

[11 : 27] And so this is the first feature he mentions. He writes to them, because your sins have been forgiven. Now you know the gospel, but do you know forgiveness?

Have you this relationship with God tonight, where you've come already to confess your sin to God, where you've come as far as we are able to know our sin, whatever it is, whether it's our inner sinfulness, or the actual sins that proceed from that, in the way that we have actions committed by us, that we know are sinful acts.

Have we come with that confession to God? Is something keeping us away from that? You notice that the second part of it is that your sins have been forgiven for his name's sake.

You don't come to God with your confession of sin and try and tidy yourself up spiritually. You don't try and give yourself some sort of dressing by which God will then accept you.

You don't try and make yourself more acceptable to him. You don't try and improve things yourself by coming as if it depended on your ability to actually cover your sins or somehow partially deal with the guilt that you're aware of as God impresses your sin upon you and your sins upon you through his word.

[12 : 48] No, you come and your dependence is absolutely and entirely on the worth of Christ. Your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake because it's the worthiness of Jesus that underlies God's forgiveness of our sins.

And when we come without confession of sin it might trouble us that perhaps our confession is not as much not as adequate or not as comprehensive as we would like it to be.

Perhaps you're troubled that you really don't get a deeper appreciation of your sins or that you've never had the kind of conviction of sin that you hear other people having.

Don't let that disturb you. Not everybody gets that. The one thing you need to be absolutely sure of is that you are a sinner who needs to be saved and that you have in Jesus what underlies God's forgiveness the worthiness of Christ the worth of Jesus.

Your sins have been forgiven you for his name's sake. And then the second feature of his writing to the children is to those he calls children verse 10 is because you know the Father.

[14 : 06] Now you go back in your mind to John 17 verse 3 that great prayer of Jesus in the upper room where he's where he's speaking directly to the Father and the audience of the disciples and there's one of the things he says this is eternal life to know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

That he says is eternal life. That's the definition of Jesus as to what eternal life consists of. What is it? What's at his heart? How does he describe it? It is to know God the Father through Jesus Christ.

What a privilege that is to know God as your Father. How do you and I relate to God tonight? In terms of forgiveness of sins or now in terms of God being your Father or not being your Father?

Do you speak to him as your Father? Is he really your Father in the way that you address him each day? Are you glad that you know God as your Father and not just as a stern judge as sometimes that caricature of him is presented to you by those who would find fault with the Gospel especially but perhaps this is something even as a feature in your own mind that you think of God as very distant sometimes that you need to do something to placate him or whatever it is.

Well we've seen that's not necessary. The worth of Christ is all that you need. What a wonderful, wonderful privilege and blessing and truth it is when God is our Father.

[15 : 43] not as our Creator merely because that's not the primary emphasis of this or of the Bible as God is the Father of his people. Yes he's our Creator but he's our Father spiritually.

He has begotten us as the old word is to make us members of his family. This is the family of God so they have a Father and their Father is God.

Just think tonight if your life wasn't looked after by this Father. If you knew nothing of his fatherly compassions.

If you didn't have the leading and the guidance of God. How often in this life we're privileged to have a parent, a father or a mother.

One or other doesn't exist. We certainly know one or other as those we go to and when we think of something that is asked of us we say I need to go and ask my father.

[16 : 47] I need to go and ask my mum. I need to go and check with them. That's what a Christian is privileged to do. It should be something every day for us shouldn't it?

I need to go and ask my father. I need to go and speak to my father before I go any further. I've got big decisions to make. I need to go and ask for father's guidance.

I need my life protected in the world from all that is around me that seeks to suck me in all the kind of false teaching all the kind of things that you find in worldliness itself as we'll see in a moment that seeks to draw me away from God from his gospel from his people.

I need a father's protection. I need his defense. I need all of that from him as a father my father in heaven. tonight that's why it's so crucial that you don't just believe in the existence of God even if you do that you're certainly ahead of some others who deny his existence but you need more than just to believe in the existence of God you need to know him as a father to know the warmth of his love the wonder of his grace the unchangeableness of his being he's writing to little children because he says you know the father secondly he's writing to fathers those who are more mature in the church in the congregation as he said I'm writing to you fathers because you know him who is from the beginning and he says exactly the same in verse 14

I write to you fathers because you know him who is from the beginning and that seems to be indicative of how it's not just saying you know him as a father as he said to the children to the less experienced he's talking now to people who have grown in their faith people who have deepened their knowledge of God people who have come to know God or Jesus even as the one who is from the beginning something of the eternity of God something of the being of God that you can only appreciate as life goes on as your knowledge increases as your understanding of God and of the Bible that he's given us increases and isn't that to be our concern and isn't that what we're really trying to do amongst many other things and that's to engage with the truth of God so that we will know him better so that we'll deepen our familiarity with God our knowledge of who he is what he's like what he's there for remember Peter facing similar situations in his day as John did with false teaching and different kinds of challenges well in his second epistle you remember he wrote somebody who reminded his readers there of those who would come in the last days to scoff at the idea of the return of Christ and say where is the promise of his coming there's no sign of him this is just nonsense it's fairy stories well he comes to end that epistle by saying you therefore beloved knowing this beforehand knowing the truth he says as you know it take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability of being rooted in the faith how are they going to do that what is it to do what do they have to do do they have to do to take care and taking care that they are not led away and led astray what is the counter to that what is the alternative to that but he says grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour

[20 : 48] Jesus Christ friends don't despise Bible doctrine don't think lightly of Bible theology that is absolutely crucial to your understanding of yourself and of God to the deepening of your relationship with him and that is what he is saying or suggesting at least here I write it to you because you know him who is from the beginning take every opportunity you can not just together not just under the preaching of the word but in the books you read in every way in which you have access to good teaching don't leave out God himself biographies are great mission books are great so many different types of books that you can read that will benefit you but this is so important God himself get to know God more and more and you will find that that is of such huge practical usefulness to you as you meet with the issues of life and so he then writes to the young men this is the third category

I write to you young men first of all he says because you have overcome the evil one and secondly because you are strong and the word of God abides in you and you have overcome the evil one well that's the first thing he says because you have overcome the evil one I think by this you could say that he means the false teachers that they've been facing the challenges of that among other things some people take it that it's simply in terms of committing their lives to God that they have overcome the evil one who's obviously the devil who's behind all of the assaults that are made upon them as the people of God but it fits the context just as well if not better to actually take because you have overcome the evil one you have overcome his efforts you have overcome his strategies in seeking to lure you away by these false teachings you've overcome that you've not just stood against that but you've overcome you've won through you've actually gone further than just to stand as it were statically against that you've withstood the heretics but what he's reminding them of is the war still goes on because that's how it is in the Christian life he's talking here to these people who are fully engaged male or female inclusive fully engaged in the work of the gospel fully engaged in standing for Christ and standing against the false teachers of their age he says you've actually won this battle so far you've withstood you've overcome but you're not finished there'll be other battles maybe not of the same kind but definitely from the same source whatever our battle is at the moment in terms of the gospel and in terms of the challenges that we face in the world whether it's the sanctity of the Lord's day one day or one week or one month maybe it's the sanctity of life at another time maybe it's both of these at the same time maybe there's a whole host of other battles that we're actually engaged in but the war is not over even if we seem at one time to prevail in one of these battles there are plenty more to be engaged in and I'm sure we'll have to come back to that one anyway so what he's saying to them is

I'm writing to you because you have overcome the evil one there's always a concern that every Christian will be an overcomer that you will take steps above through the grace of God all that is trying with all its might to take you away from the gospel from safety from the church from Jesus and then he says to them because you are strong and the word of God abides in you and obviously these young men symbolize or represent this category of very vigorous activity in the church that's how we're taking it and what he's saying to them here is I'm writing to you because you are strong and how have they been made strong because the word of God abides in them how are we strengthened how do we come to be made strong because we don't produce that strength ourselves we don't actually have the capacity to create spiritual strength for ourselves even though there are certain things that we need to carry out we are made strong through the word of God abiding in us through the word of God abiding in us that's why this evil one is really desperately trying all the time throughout the world to take people away from the word of God to get people to actually neglect the word of God to get people actually away from the idea that they are made strong by the word of God abiding in them remaining in them working in them but that's how you're made strong that's why it's so important never to neglect the word of God whenever the thought comes to your mind on a daily basis or whenever it might be

I don't really feel like going to the word of God today I don't think I need it today I'll just pick it up tomorrow and I'm too busy to really do my devotions today and I can actually leave it and I'll catch up tomorrow you know there's a sense in the Christian life you never really catch up because what you've neglected today something else is going to come up tomorrow and you're not going to catch up in that time it's hugely important that the word of God abides in you and again that's what we're saying every congregation should be like so that every congregation and this congregation no exception this is what we're actually seeking by God's grace and by God's blessing to see more and more new conversions new people coming to be incorporated into the fellowship of God's family people coming to be born again people giving their lives to Christ those who are experienced learning even more of what they've come to know passing it on to the younger generation and a vigorous engagement with that which is at enmity with God which takes us to the world and the time has gone pretty well but let me just for five minutes or so come to the next passage 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 and so on now it's important that we see the relation between what he said here they are the church they are the people of God they're the family of God and because they are loved by God and because they have a love for God they cannot then love the world now the world in John means a lot it's not it doesn't mean primarily the physical world as you see it the world in John more often than not means human society acting against God apart from those who are already committed to God to Christ to his church those that he mentions in the previous passage that he's writing to the world is a different entity and they have an engagement with the world they have a challenge from the world and to the world the world is human society acting against God and you know it's interesting that that human society that ungodly society that society of human beings that does not want to bow the knee to Christ or come to be in any way part of his church they have a trinity of their own we have the trinity as Christians the Father the Son the Holy Spirit one God they have a trinity they have the desires of the flesh the desires of the eyes and pride and possessions that's their trinity that's the trinity of the world that's what the world lives for it's very like in fact what we saw this morning from Ecclesiastes chapter 2 in fact I was struck this afternoon going over this passage again how much the two dovetail together and how we're very much facing the same kind of situation in a way as Ecclesiastes 2 is dealing with that's as God arranged it not by my planning but what he says here is

I'm using the word lusts from the older translation because I think it's stronger and it's really the word that's meant what's meant by the word that's desired here is stronger in the translation the lusts of the flesh the sinful appetites is what it means so what he says is all that is in the world this world this society of human beings that is arranged against God it comprises the lusts of the flesh the lusts of the eyes and pride and possessions of the pride of life what are they what do these consist of well it's interesting I'm going to leave it with you as a study I thought I'd have time to go into it but if you go back to Genesis chapter 3 to the account that we're given there of the fall of mankind when the devil and it's for no it's no accident the devil so often is represented by a serpent in the Bible in Genesis 3 when you read about the fall of man when he came to the woman you remember how he spoke to the woman he said has God really said

[30 : 49] I wanted to inject a doubt in the mind of the woman first of all and get the man through that and then he says God knows that when your eyes will be opened you will be like God knowing good and evil so when the woman saw that the tree first of all was good for food see the desires of the flesh that it was a delight to the eyes the lusts of the eyes and a tree to be desired to make one wise the pride of life because what she really came as she accepted that word of the devil she came to say to herself I can actually improve on God's prototype I can take steps to improve on the way that God has made me on the position that God has given me that's what the devil persuaded her of that's the pride of life she thought to herself I can achieve a new improved version of humankind that was the devil's snare and she fell for it and Adam fell for it don't blame the woman only she was the first one to be approached she gave to Adam

Adam had the covenant made with him by God and he capitulated he caved in he was just as much one who gave in to the devil's the devil's temptation as Eve but that's the result of it they came to be sinners and their first reaction was to try and hide from God what a change the lusts of the flesh sinful cravings that are within our hearts that are so often followed out through the lusts of the eyes I don't need to tell you tonight as you look out over the world as you look into your own houses as you experience from day to day the things of life I don't need to tell you how much there is there that appeals to the lusts of the flesh and to the lusts of the flesh through the lusts of the eyes television programs on television social media the internet and don't leave out advertising either because a lot of the advertisements you find in fact all of them you might say are directed to human covetousness it's not just it never says to you do you like what you see and leave it at that it's really saying to you you need this you really need this in your life even if deep down you know you don't the advertising appeals to your covetousness people are going to get into huge levels of debt in the run up to Christmas because they just can't resist the lusts of the flesh and the lusts of the eyes they want to do good by their children or whatever they want to have the same as other children have and that's understandable that can be hugely damaging when you get into massive debt that's pride of life which means pride of life really means when you see yourself as superior for one reason or other to others like for example it's easy to find those who and it's true of ourselves naturally too because we have certain things that others lack because we have certain status that others lack certain possessions that others lack we can very easily conclude well

I'm a cut above them I've made it up the rungs of the ladder and they're still down below the pride of life pride in ourselves in our achievements in our possessions at the expense of others you can see how the love of the world is so incompatible and indeed contradictory to the love of God the two passages are important that you hold them together and these characteristics of the world the lusts of the flesh the lusts of the eyes pride in possessions the pride of life it's a very deceptive temptation it's a very deceptive thing in the attractions that the world holds out for you that's why we have to pray so much and teach so much for our children to actually learn to resist the deceptive attractions of the world that presents things to them as if not just better than the gospel and better than following Jesus but placing themselves then in the most favorable positions of all pray for our children we are doing that let's keep on praying for them because they are so much the target of this world and its lusts and its affections and its desires and the pride of its life

I was watching a nature documentary the other evening and one of David Attenborough's narrations and it came to a certain desert in Iran very rocky hot desert one of the hottest places in the world and you find a viper there that's not found anywhere else it's a viper called the spider-tailed horned viper looks exactly like the rocks it curls itself up into a little hole and its tail is right beside its head and on its tail it has what looks like a spider little legs and a bloated bit at the end of the tail that looks like a spider's body and all the snake does the viper does is wait in that hollow its eyes closed just shaking this little tail around making it look like a spider is actually crawling all over the stone and disappears and comes back again along comes a flycatcher bird beautiful little bird flycatcher on the way passage to somewhere else and it sees this very attractive looking spider it seems it sees it from a distance catches its eye still rattling around so off it goes and you see it flying in and just as it's about to take hold or peck at what it seems what it thinks is a spider it's in the jaws of the snake and that's it and the world is a dangerous place and don't think because we're

Christians we won't be attracted by it that we won't give in to it we need always the word of God abiding in us we need the grace of Christ directing us we need the protection of this father to look after us because the world he says is passing away and its desire shall lust but whoever does the will of God abides forever you see we're given a very simple choice by the gospel is it to be the world or God is it to be death or life there shouldn't be any hesitation as to which we choose but sometimes sadly that's not how it is let's pray

[38 : 44] Lord we thank you for the advantages we have through having your gospel the advantages we have in free access to your word so much in our possession and yet we confess oh Lord too little used we give thanks tonight Lord that we come to be made familiar with the way in which we ought to see the dangers around us and even within ourselves help us we pray to combat the lusts of the flesh the lusts of the eyes the pride of life help us to be unlike this world in its nature and enable us to hold out to that world the life that is in Christ the life that you have provided for us in your salvation Lord grant us as a congregation that we may indeed continue to thrive and to grow and to be more and more unified as little children and fathers and young men in all the stages of our experience be our guide and stay we pray for

Jesus sake Amen well we're going to conclude our service now this evening in Psalm 115 Psalm 115 in the Scottish Psalter that's verses 12 to 18 on page 395 the tune is Effingham the Lord of us has mindful been and he will bless us still he will the house of Israel bless bless Aaron's house he will verses 12 to 18 on page 395 the Lord of us has mindful been and he will bless us still he will the house next

Blessed are ye of the Lord.

Who made the earth and hell. The heavenly heavens are God's body.

Earth too, main sons have given. The dead nor knew to silence go.

[42 : 26] God's praise do not record. But as forth we forever will.

Bless God. Praise ye the Lord. I'll go to the door to my left this evening.

Now unto him who is able to keep us from falling. And to present us faultless before his glory with exceeding great joy. To the only wise God our saviour.

The glory and majesty. Dominion and power. Now and evermore. Amen.