

"Adopted by God"
Romans 8:13-17
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Imagine it is 1854 and you are nine years old.

You live on the streets of New York, homeless, alone.

No one wants you, no one cares for you - you are an orphan!

Your world is a slum.

Everywhere there are people jammed together in misery.

Your clothes are rags, not quite able to keep you warm.

Your friends are children like yourself -

they teach you to steal bread from unattended windows,
and to snatch purses from elderly ladies and wallets from
the men who visit the brothels.

Your life is merely survival -

you wander the streets as an urban nomad.

THEN ONE DAY a man comes to you and tells you there is a way out of these slums and streets.

You can go to a place where you will have warm clothing and food - all the food you can eat.

This scenario is not fiction - It literally happened (as some of you may have read).

In the latter 1800s hundreds of thousands of immigrants poured into New York City.

Families broke apart as some parents never reached America alive.

Armies of young orphans roamed the city streets alone.

Then a young minister, named Charles Brice, appalled at the desperate plight of these youngsters hit upon a daring strategy to help them.

Brice, with the help of others began to write to town leaders, pastors of churches, and other individuals all along the railroad that ran west from New York.

Stops were arranged, the train was advertised, and children were rounded up on the train with no specific destination in mind BUT with the blind hope that some compassionate person at some point along the way would **adopt** them.

At each stop children were whisked into the waiting arms of men and women who wanted them.

Children were given a **new name, made part of a new family**, and in many cases showered with **all the things they had never before** know, best of all: love, acceptance and security.

In American history, we have known it as the **Orphan Train**.
And for nearly 100,000 children the hope of a family became a reality.

Everyone of us comes into this world a spiritual orphan - we are lost, homeless and alone.

BUT when we become Christians we are adopted into God's own family.

Christianity is not just joining a club or subscribing to an idealistic lifestyle - it is to receive a new name, a new family, a new identity, a new father - **IT IS TO BE ADOPTED BY GOD!**

(Much of the above is quoted or paraphrased from Steve Lawhead in the preface to a short Campus Life book or booklet - The title is lost)

Barbara and I did not conceive him.

His biological father is unknown even to his birth mother and his birth mother didn't want him.

His genetic family included thieves, drug addicts, pushers and prostitutes.

His inheritance included poverty, abuse, abandonment, prison and death.

But he was adopted.

He didn't earn it, he didn't choose it and he didn't even know it, but he was – he was adopted.

His adopted family included godly grandparents, godly siblings, godly aunts and uncles, and Christ-following cousins.

His inheritance included safety, acceptance, love, family, freedom and life.

Paris Nelson is our adopted son.

The only “before and after” contrasts greater than the two stories I shared with you are **yours and mine**.

Before:

Ephesians 2:1-3 “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

That's before, but now:

1 Peter 2:9-10 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but **now you are the people of God**; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Ephesians 1:4-6 “For he chose us in (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love⁵ he predestined us to be **adopted** as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

Galatians 4:3-7 “So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.⁴ But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the **full rights of sons (“adoption”)**.⁶ Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

And now to our text for today: Romans 8:14-17 “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. **15** For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” **16** The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, **17** and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

In the first four chapters of the book of Romans the Apostle Paul clearly establishes how it is that we become Christians – it is by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Romans 3:21-22 “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.”²²

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

In chapter 5 Paul begins to describe the benefits of this new relationship we now have with God by his grace.

In chapters 6-8 Paul goes on to describe both why we can and how we can live the Christian life – how we can live increasingly **holy lives** following Jesus.

It is in the early part of chapter 8 that Paul connects holy living with the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Romans 8:4 “in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”

The ability or power for a Christian lifestyle, for living Christianly, for following Jesus, for holy living is in the Spirit of God who is now so closely connected to us that the Bible speaks of him as “in us.”

Beginning at verse 14 Paul says that the Spirit’s presence in us and enabling of us to obey Jesus is **evidence of a most significant change in our relationship with God.**

Romans 8:14 “because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”

Coincident with what we might call “being saved” or becoming a

Christian is this matter of being adopted by God.

- **Justification** focuses on the issue of our sins and forgiveness.
- **Redemption** focuses on our release from slavery to sin.
- **Reconciliation** focuses on the change from God's hostility toward us to God's favor toward us.
- But **adoption** takes it a step further. Adoption is about becoming a member of the family, becoming a child of the Father.

I want to speak more to that new relationship but before I do I want you to see that this subject is still connected to the issue of holy living.

Every one of the verses I quoted earlier about us becoming a child of God includes the issue of holy living.

- 1 Peter 2:10 about being the new “people of God” goes on to say:
1 Peter 2:11-12 “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.
¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”
- Ephesians says he “adopted us as sons”
and then in Ephesians 1:12 “in order that we...might be for the praise of his glory.”
- Galatians says we have the full right of sons by adoption therefore in Galatians 4:9
“But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?”
- And here in Romans 8 we have received the “Spirit of adoption” followed by Romans 8:13
“For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live,”

And so I repeat that there is a connection between our being adopted by God and our holy living.

I think Paul dwells on that theme in verses 14-17.

The point is similar to Paul's words to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 6:14 –7:1 “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵ What harmony is there between Christ and Belial ? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and **I will be their God, and they will be my people.**” ¹⁷ “Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.” ¹⁸ **I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,** says the Lord Almighty.” ¹ Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

The motivation for holy living is a new relationship with God.

It is specifically this new relationship of being adopted, of belonging to God in this way that is the major motivating power behind holy living.

Why do I want to love and serve God?

I love him because I am his child, I belong to him, and he loves me.”

It is when we realize what our relationship with God now is by his grace that we begin to truly live differently.

We no longer relate to God out of fear but out of affection.

How does the Spirit bring us to this motivation?

Romans 8:15 “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba, Father.*”

One author has said it so well: “The Spirit does not lead by stirring up slavish fear. He leads by stirring up family affection. He does not get you to kill sin by making you a slave who acts out of fear, but by making you a son who acts out of faith and affection.” Piper, Romans 8:14-17 2002

150 years ago an author captured this concept in the title of his excellent book: *The Explosive power of a new Affection.*

It doesn't mean that we are unable to sin any longer but that sinning is now inconsistent, unreasonable, and unconscionable.

I am now part of a new family; I have a new Father; I've been adopted by God.

The Westminster Confession of Faith: All those that are justified, God (grants), in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of **adoption**, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have His name put upon them, receive the spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father: yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation. XII 1 Of Adoption

This idea of the ***fatherhood*** of God is not just theological semantics.

J.I. Packer in his book, Knowing God, wrote, “If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.” (J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 201)

Too many of us have made of Christianity only a doctrine to be believed rather than also a relationship to be lived.

And so God has become for us the One who is there but not the Father who is here.

To be sure, having our sins forgiven, having the guilt removed and the sentence of hell lifted are of foundational importance.

Romans 8:1 “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

That is a great truth and it is fundamental “gospel.”

But it is not the end of the story.

We aren’t just freed from eternal punishment.

We aren’t just saved from something.

We are saved too something, something so good.

Christianity is not just a legal issue but also a relational issue.

Freed from guilt and condemnation is not the same as being part of the Father's family.

Again from Packer: "To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater." (Packer, *Knowing God*, 207)

Listen to the Bible:

1 John 3:1 "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.

That first word, "See" is "look" or "behold."

"Look or stand in awe" of the great love the Father has lavished on us.

This is your relationship with God by virtue of being adopted by him.

Jesus said, John 16:27 "The Father Himself loves you..."

This is not generic love; this is not the love so often thought of when people say "God loves the whole world."

No, instead, the kind of love the Father has for Jesus is the kind of love he has for you.

That's the point – we are individually loved by the Father the way Jesus is loved by the Father.

Consider that! The Father, God, loves you the way he loves Jesus.

That's how personal his love is for you.

But there is a dimension of the Father's love for us that is even more incredible than his love for Jesus.

Romans 5:8,10 "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us... when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son"

We have a hard time not thinking that we must earn God's love and also that we never will earn it.

We look at our deficiencies and failures and assume God sees them and looks on us with disfavor.

And then we further assume that we might be saved from hell, when we die, but for now we are on our own.

You remember the story of the prodigal son that Jesus told.

When the younger son finally decided to go home, do you remember what he planned to say?

Luke 15:18-19 "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. (Thus far his statement is true.) I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' (False.)

He assumed his father's actions would be based on his own actions.

The jealous older brother made the same assumption about the father but not because of failure but because of merit.

The older brother said in Luke 15:29 "Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours."

In the context he is saying, I deserve your love.

Sinclair Ferguson has nailed it: "The guilt-ridden (prodigal son) was calculating on the basis of his sin, rather than on his father's character."

(Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*, 48)

And I would add that the pride-ridden older brother was calculating on the basis of merit rather than on his father's character.

But our heavenly Father gives his love to us based on need not based on merit.

Paraphrasing Ralph Venning "There is no reason to be given for love but love."

Ephesians 1:3-5

"Long ago, before God made the world, God chose us to be his very own, through what Christ would do for us; he decided then to make us holy in his eyes, without a single fault we who stand before him covered in his love. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by sending Jesus Christ to die for us. And he did this because he wanted to." TLB paraphrase

Not because we were attractive or worthy but solely for “his good pleasure”.

We don’t readily accept that because we know that among ourselves there is no free lunch, there is always a price, an expectation, that if we don’t meet, it’s over.

We must stop feeling safe with God **only when we think we are doing well.**

We must come to understand that He is our Father even more when we are doing poorly, mostly when we have failed miserably – for then I am believing that his love is not caused by me, it is his love, freely given.

Brennan Manning wrote, “When I seek to fashion a self-image from the adulation of others and the inner voice whispers, ‘You’ve arrived; you’re a player...,’ there is no truth in that self-concept. (Or) when I sink into despondency and the inner voice whispers, ‘You are no good, a fraud, a hypocrite, and dilettante,’ there is no truth in any image shaped from that message. My dignity (comes from being) Abba’s child....” (Manning in Abba’s Child 63)

I know that every stage of life has its unique challenges but as we grow older we look at childhood as such an idyllic time.

“Look at that kid”, we say of our own child, “not a care in the world”.

He doesn’t have to worry about where food will come from, whether he will have a bed tonight and if anything frightens or hurts him, he comes running to me with no doubt I can save him.

I’d like him to learn to say “please” and “thank you” but they are superfluous formalities to him because he fully expects to be cared for whether he says those things or not because, after all, I’m his father.

He may choose to disobey me and grieve the loss of a privilege or the threat of a spanking but it never even enters his mind that I would cease to love him or care for him – he knows I’m his father.

In fact if I put my own life at risk to save his, if he was even aware of it, he would expect it – it would seem perfectly congruent with the relationship – after all, I'm his father.

Do you know that is your relationship with our heavenly Father?
You are not alone, your Father loves you!

Many Christians, and I think especially men, live with a quiet fear that they are alone and even if there is a God out there, they live with the quiet fear that they don't measure up **or they live with the proud assumption that they do.**

But that is not the way with our Father.
He asks for nothing but our trust.

We should stand amazed as in 1 John 3:1 “See (Behold!) what kind of love the Father has given (lavished) to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.

But I don't want you to only think of the Father's love for you as great because it is undeserved.

We might be tempted to see the Father's love as only a kind of hard, calculated, committed choice.

Instead we must see it for what it also is – deep affection.

Sometimes it helps to ask the question this way: “Does God like you?”
The answer is “Yes, he does!”

He delights in you. (Jeremiah 31:20 among other passages)

We were created to live in fellowship with the Father.

Hear that please!

We weren't created to be God's little robots to get God's work done.
We weren't created just to accomplish something.

We were created to live in relationship with the Father and the Son and one another.

1 John 1:3 “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

Romans 8:15 "you received the Spirit of sonship ("adoption"). And by him we cry, "Abba,Father."

Martin Luther said of this word "Abba:" "This is a very little word, and yet in spite of that, it encompasses everything.

It is not the mouth that speaks this but the heart.

"Although life is sometimes very difficult and at times I even feel that you aren't there - yet I AM your child..."

The word "abba" is a word used by little children when calling their father - it is a word that many of you know is as intimate as the word "Daddy".

The Jews could not have imagined addressing God as "Daddy" - it would have been inappropriate, irreverent.

But what did Jesus do? He used the word many times.

And here we are told that our relationship to Him is so intimate that we may call him "daddy" - not out of disrespect but out of tenderness.

One writer tells of a friend living in another country who adopted a preschool child from that country.

The friend spoke of the months that passed after the child was adopted when he longed for a relationship with her but she was doubtful and reserved.

But one day she appeared beside where he was sitting and she held out a shoe and said, "Daddy, I need another shoelace."

They were the sweetest words he had ever heard from her lips. (Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*, 90)

Imagine our Father's delight when we finally understand how much he loves us!

III. Lastly this morning I want you to think with me briefly about the FUTURE of our adoption - where is it headed?

Look at the first part of V17: "and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ..."

Paul writes, I want you to know something, I want you to count on it.

Since you have been adopted into God's family.

Since you are one of God's children, by faith in Jesus Christ,
you are an heir to all God's promises.

Now that inheritance is spelled out, at least in part, in the verses which follow.

Yes, suffering for a season is part of that inheritance BUT ultimately it is life in the presence of God and in the fellowship of those who love him forever that is your inheritance.

And that inheritance of life everlasting with God is as sure for you as it is for Jesus himself - because you are a co-heir with Jesus.

What he inherits, we inherit!

There is popular talk of mansions of material splendor, of all the material things we lack here being a large part of what we will inherit in the next life - but to dwell on those things is to miss the major point:

Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you **that where I am** there you may be also."

We've been adopted - we belong to God.

Adoption is not mainly about things.

As in "wouldn't it be fun to be adopted by Bill Gates or some other wealthy person?"

Adoption is about relationship - about belonging.

Our inheritance is the immediate presence of almighty God forever.

Brennan Manning tells the story of Edward Farrell a pastor in Detroit who went to visit his 80 year-old uncle in Ireland.

On his uncle's birthday, the two of them went for an early morning walk.

After walking in silence for some time and then standing side by side watching the rising sun, the uncle suddenly turned with a great smile and began skipping down the path.

The pastor followed and said, "Uncle Seamus, you look so happy, can you tell me why?"

"Yes", said the eighty-year-old man, "You see me Abba is very fond of me." (Manning Abba's Child 64)

Everett Fullam was a missionary to a tribe of people in the interior of Nigeria.

These people had never heard the word Africa much less the word America.

When the chief heard one day of two Americans walking on the moon, he said it was impossible because one only as to look to see that the moon is too small to hold two people.

But in spite of their naïve view of the world when they became Christians their understanding of things eternal was deep.

Fullam explains it this way after he baptized three of them:
"There were two men and one woman.

- We stood on the banks of a muddy river, wet and happy.
- I had never seen three more joyful people.
- What is the best thing about this experience? I asked.

All three continued to smile...but one spoke, in clear, deliberate English: 'Behind this universe stands one God, not a great number of warring spirits, as we had always believed, but one God. **And that God loves me.**' (Everett Fullam Living the Lord's Prayer 1980 p27,28)

Will you believe God today?