

Sermon for Sunday, April 25, 2010
Clay Smith

SONS AND DAUGHTERS: ADOPTION
Romans 8:14-17

Did you have a good father? Some when asked this question are eager to tell you all about a nurturing, strong father. Others recoil, being reminded of memories that are painful and troubling.

Paul focuses our attention in this section of Romans on God as our Father. It is not a new idea to Paul; rather, it is found in the Old Testament as well. The truth of God as our Father, and us as His children has been developed in the New Testament and driven into the deep parts of our heart...calling on us to ponder what it means to have a Father, a perfect and loving Father in the creator of the universe. Let's read together.

Romans 8:14 - those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 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." ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Adoption is in the news right now. Have you heard about the Russian adoption tragedy? A little Russian boy had been adopted into an American family. He has significant issues in his life, scars from being an orphan, institutionalized and neglected. The little one is hard to manage, at times becoming violent, and threatening severe violence against those who have sworn before the law of the land to care for him.

In an act of desperation, and undoubtedly deep pain, this family sent this little boy back to Russia. They put him on a plane by himself, to be met by the authorities in Russia...so they can figure out what to do with him. This boy is an orphan. Again. Rejected and unloved due to his supposed violence and troubles. What happened to the pledge, the promise to care for, to nurture? A family had reached the end of its resources to love any longer. They were spent and the only thing left to do was to turn their backs.

Does it strike deep sadness in you...both for that family and for the boy? Perhaps you have experienced - maybe not literally but emotionally - being sent away by your father. Disengaged, rejected, set aside...fear and shame of because of what you've done.

The truth is that we don't have to fear. We have a Father who will never turn his back on us. If we've repented and placed our faith in Jesus Christ, we have been adopted by God, brought into His family. And yet, earthly adoption is a pale shadow of what our Father has done for us. Our Father received us into His family. This picture is used all through the Bible to describe what God has done for us. God is called "Father" fifteen times in the Old Testament. Israel was adopted by God to be His child, His son. They were set aside from all the other nations with His affection and commitment given to them. His pledge was given to love and care for them. Although we see it in the Old Testament, we have a much clearer picture in the New Testament. In comparison to the fifteen times God is called father in the Old Testament, He is "father" one hundred eighteen times in the Gospel of John alone.¹ We are God's children; He is our Father, our perfect and perfectly good Father. But unlike human adoptions, we cannot and will not be set aside because of our violence or fear or shame.

¹ Robert Peterson. *Adopted by God*, (P&R: Phillipsburg, NJ, 2001), p. 14.

We have a Father who planned before the beginning of time to make us His sons and daughters by removing us from one family opposed to Him and placing us in His family. We are united and heirs of Jesus, the true and full Son of God, inheriting the blessing he has won for us. And we are made sure of this truth by the power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, bearing witness to it and teaching us what it means to live as sons and daughters.

As we consider this truth of being adopted by God this morning, let's simply ask two questions of the text: Who Are We, and How Do we Live?

Who Are We?

We are children, sons and daughters.

To think of ourselves as adopted sons and daughters of God, some have to undo the concept of father, because you had a poor one or maybe one not present at all. So to think of God as father may be a concept you really don't want to consider.

But even with our wounds or our painful past, I think the Bible would call us to learn to yearn for what a father could be. Others have to learn to yearn because we have settled for our good fathers and can't dream of a better one. But our Father in heaven is one of perfection, perfect goodness, gentleness, nurture, strength, protection, love, kindness and compassion. So for some, the first step of really considering who God is to us is to let our hearts dream.

For others, a different barrier is present. We have a cultural belief that we all are children of God in the same way, regardless of what our life looks like, regardless if any family resemblance is found in life. It is true that God is Father in a limited sense, in that he is universal Creator. All are accountable to him. But, that is not the fullness of which Paul speaks. We have a strong Father who makes enemies into His children.

It cheapens the truth of being a child of God by supposing that God does not love His children enough to deal with that which separates them from Him. We don't have a weak, heavenly grandfather or a sugar daddy who only cares to buy us off to get affection...essentially in it to prop up His own fragile ego rather than a committed love for the child.

It cheapens who God is to invent one who is so weak and so syrupy loving that he doesn't or can't deal with what is really wrong in the world. Could you imagine going to the bedside of a sick child and telling the parents that God their Father loves them and that's all, that He couldn't really do anything about their situation? He hasn't or can't or won't defeat the power of death. That's not a perfect Father, that is buying into the limitations and even sins of our own fathers and projecting it onto God!

The idea of being sons and daughters of God has its root in Old Testament background. 2 Sam 7:14 says specifically of David, but representatively of all Israel, "I will be his father, and he will be my son." We are heirs of God, sons of God, as we stand in faith in the promises made to Abraham and David. We are made sons of God by faith, by belief in His name, trust in His salvation for us, by giving ourselves to the promise of a Redeemer. As His sons, we inherit God Himself!

In addition to the Old Testament background, Paul builds on a cultural custom of adoption. A Roman father had absolute authority over his children, called *patria potesta*. His authority was of complete control, including life and death. This authority NEVER was set aside, no matter how old a child was. This made adoption a very serious matter.

When a son was adopted, usually later in life to ensure an heir and the glory of the prospective father, the son literally changed families. He came under the *patria potesta* of another father. All his rights of his old family were removed, and he gained the rights of his new family. Further, his old life was completely cancelled, old debts cancelled or transferred to his adoptive father; he became a new person in the eyes of the law. He became heir to his new father's wealth, even if natural sons were subsequently born, he was co-heir.

A ceremony was performed in the presence of a Roman authority that symbolized the sale of the son from one father to the other. This son was symbolically sold to the new father one time, and the birth father bought him back. The same process happened a second time. He was brought back into his new family. A third time he was "sold" and the birth father did not buy him back. He came into the possession of his new father, his new authority. This adopted son had a new family in every sense of the word: financially, emotionally, a new authority and new set of responsibility.

Further, natural sons could be disowned by their father, but adopted sons could not. It was impossible to do. We are adopted by our Father.

The Bible tells us Jesus, the natural son, was disowned on the cross. Not because of his sin, but because of ours. When he was resurrected and reconciled to his Father, we came along with him as co-heirs, adopted sons and daughters who cannot be disowned. We are secure in Christ because our Father has adopted us. He bought us with the blood of Jesus and won't give us back.

Our debt of sin is cancelled, paid by Christ and cancelled from our account. Our Father no longer treats us according to our old man, the old debts. We are no longer trapped in our slavery to sin, our fear of God's exacting punishment. We are placed in a new family, with new privileges and new blessings. We are sons who can't be disowned because of Jesus' work for us, our union with him and the love of our Father, blessings that belong to Jesus and are given to us in his family.

Our Father has not made us His sons and daughters to live in isolation. We are put in a new family with brothers and sisters whose burdens become our burdens, whose joys become our joys. I read this week a person who wrote, "The person who says I can be a Christian without being part of the church is missing the whole point. You might as well say I can be born without being part of a family."

If we are indeed bought by our Father, bought with the precious blood of Jesus, let us live as if His family matters to us, not cast aside at the first sign of trouble with one another. It can be difficult to bear with one another sometimes, can't it? We disagree, fight, and accuse. But we will be together for eternity. Granted the sinful part of me and you will be finally put away, praise God, but could we live today like our relationship will never end? Dealing with differences with compassion and seeking understanding? Tangibly being involved in one another's lives enough to walk together through darkness?

It is the fear of being an orphan that makes us refuse to deal with one another. It is an orphan mentality that moves us to protect ourselves. But we are not orphans. We are children.

Adoption also erases elitism in community. Adoption forces us to see we all receive the glories of God's grace under the same conditions: we are united to Christ, the true Son of God. Free to acknowledge the roots of my heart are the same as the roots of the hearts of the men and women in the prison down the street, when it comes right down to it. I'm not better than you. If you could only see the darkness of my soul, I fear you would turn away from me. That is, until you see the same darkness within your own soul. None of us are natural sons of God. We are all adopted. Once were aliens and strangers, but now have become His own sons.

How We Live

A. Led by the Spirit, verse 14 means Beginning to Look like our Family

What Paul means by being led by the Spirit is not some sort of mystical guidance of the Holy Spirit, although He does lead us in our lives. This place speaks specifically to our character, our behavior and our values, our loves, are conformed to that of our older brother. If we are led by Him, we are being shaped in family resemblance. And it happens by the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.

You know Missy and I have two adopted kids, both African American. Missy was at the dry cleaners down the street and the woman behind the counter, also African American, was confused by Emma Kathryn. Over a series of visits, she made comments and asked questions trying to figure out Missy and this brown kid. We so much rather would have had her just come out and ask, "What's the deal with the white mom and brown kid?" But she didn't.

So one visit, she *tried to ask*. "She must look like her father," the woman commented to Missy. Missy, with quick wit and twinkle in her eye, said "Yes, I suppose she does." True on two levels. Not that Emma Kathryn looks like me...but her life looks like ours. She is part of our family and as she is with us, her life begins to take on the shape of our life as her parents. My life is multiplied in her life. That scares me to death sometimes...but it is true. As she spends time with me, she looks like me, on the inside. Also true she looks like her heavenly Father, whose image she is in as well as whose character is being formed in her.

This is true for all of us as God's children. As you spend time with your Father, you are shaped to be like your Father. What a gift. So this verse both describes what is true, "if we are led by the Spirit, we are God's sons and daughters," it verifies whose we are. But also, it gives us a pathway to walk, being led by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit will open your eyes to the Father and Son in your life as you see your own sin and need of Jesus, as well as the provision Jesus has made for us. Do you ask for his work? Do you pray for the Spirit to lead you, to reveal Jesus to you, to shape you...and do you seek to yield to his leading by repenting of sin and placing faith in the work of Christ?

B. Witness to Fatherly Affection, verse 15

We no longer have the spirit of fear, but of sonship. We are no longer afraid as if Father is irritated or angry with us, separated by some great gulf. We know God is holy but we are not in slavish fear because of Christ. We have the spirit of sonship, evidenced by the way the Holy Spirit enables our hearts to cry out to our Father, "Abba, Father." What does that mean?

The word Paul uses for "cry" here is a word used in occasion of intense feeling or struggle. The demon-possessed man in Mark 5 is said to "cry," same word. The boy possessed in Mark 9 is said to "cry," same word. Even on the cross, in Matthew 27, Jesus is said to have "cried out with a loud voice and gave up his spirit." Same word. The child who cries out "Father" is one who is crying out in a crisis moment, a time of desperation. Do you ever feel desperate and need the aid of a Father who is powerful enough and present enough to come to rescue you?

The problem is that we don't often feel desperate. We trust our strategies, our tactics, our competence so that we don't feel as out-of-control as "desperate" feels. But sometimes the Lord allows us to feel desperation whether we want it or not. When a child wanders from the faith and we can do nothing about it, do we feel desperate then? Does the threat of Islam make you feel desperate? Do you have any health concerns you are utterly helpless to resolve? Can you have the Holy Spirit open your eyes to the way things really are? We are desperate and only our Father can change things.

When we feel desperate sometimes it is easy to feel afraid, like we are all alone. That is what Paul means by the spirit of slavery, falling back into fear. We feel like we may not be sons and daughters of God, but property for Him to toy with. Do you ever feel that way? In a particularly difficult season of life, Missy and I have said that we feel like God's pin cushion. He pokes us here and there just to see what we will do. That is the spirit of slavery, falling into fear. What if we are alone?

If you are here and not a believer, that sense of being alone can be crushing. It can drive to do one of two things. Either thumb your nose at God, with an "I don't need you anyway" sort of pride that makes you even more lonely and fearful, when honest. Or it may leave you feeling desperation, like you are living in a Woody Allen movie where everything is random and meaningless...even relationships don't ultimately matter. The alternative, the call of your Father would have you in a sense of weakness and coming to the end of your rope, cry out to someone who can hear, the God who is there.

For us as Christians, and you who feel a need to cry out, Paul says comes the Spirit of God, teaching us, enabling us, to call on God, not as a piece of property would call on his master but rather to call on God as our Father. Through the Spirit, you and I participate in a communion with our Father in heaven that was experienced by Jesus, the Son of God. What Paul wants us to see in these moments of crisis and pain is that the Holy Spirit is in you to give you a sense of sonship with your Father that Jesus experienced in his humanity -- an experience of sonship; not just knowing in our hearts that we belong to God, but an experience of that sonship, of being heirs, connected to our big brother Jesus in the midst of crisis.

Old Testament Law (Deuteronomy 19) requires two witnesses to establish truth. One witness might misremember, or get confused, or even twist the truth. So you need two. Here in the midst of our pain and crisis, Paul says we aren't left just to our own curiosity or wondering if we are alone. We have our own internal sense of being God's children...a gift of the Spirit...but also we have the witness of the Spirit, teaching us to cry out to our Father. When you can't trust your own feelings, the Holy Spirit is there in your heart to confirm, to convince you that you are not alone. Your Father is with you. He loves you no matter what your circumstances may say to you.

Sinclair Ferguson has described this phenomenon like this. "*Christ makes a home for his people in the presence of the Father; the Holy Spirit makes a home for the Father and the Son in the believer...the Spirit is the divine home-maker.*"² When you are in pain and you can't trust your own tortured feelings, the Holy Spirit comes to you and to me reminding us that we have an older brother Jesus, who was tempted and tortured for us, so that we are loved, received and welcomed as the perfect sons and daughters of God. And nothing can take it away because Jesus won it. Don't we need to be reminded of that when we feel alone!

A. Presence of Spirit within heart, verse 16 to testify

Do you ever feel unworthy, or undeserving of God's family? Cheer up. Who do you think moves you to hate your sin in your life, genuinely hate it, not simply the exposure of it to other people? Who do you think moves you to cry out for mercy to Christ? Who do you think gives you that sense of despair that says, "I can't do this by myself"? These are not natural feelings. Take cheer at the evidence of sonship in your life, the conviction of the Spirit in your conscience.

This presence and witness of the Holy Spirit to our adoption is the birthright of the weakest child of God among us. He teaches even the frail one to cry out, "Daddy", help me, when we are in danger.

² Sinclair Ferguson. *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), p. 187.

It is as though to our weak and feeble cry, the Holy Spirit adds his booming voice. When our son Isaiah was about eighteen months old, he was following his sister around the house and they were playing with doors, opening and closing them. And Isaiah got his little finger caught in one of them. But I didn't recognize it at first because his cries were so weak. He wasn't screaming or yelling... what I came to discern was that it was too painful for him to scream. His sister, though, saw what happened and added her voice to his weak cries. She started yelling for help, screaming with all her voice just to make sure that I, the father, knew that Isaiah was in trouble.

The Holy Spirit does what Emma Kathryn did for her brother. He adds his booming voice to our feeble cries to make sure our Father knows we are in need. We are not alone, but we have an Advocate who pleads our case loudly before our Father. And when we hear the resounding nature of that loud cry, we remember and feel that we are not alone. But we have a Father who is eager to bless his children.

B. Suffering with Christ, verse 17. We share in his suffering

We need the testimony of the Spirit because as God's children we will suffer. We suffer by having trials on the outside and trials on the inside, of circumstance and of character. Suffering, with Christ, is part of the process of our Father making us have family resemblance with Christ.

Suffering, that is sharing in Christ' sufferings, fits us to share in his glory. We are molded by our suffering. When you feel the suffering of significant disappointment, it reorients your heart to note what is really important. When you suffer injustice, it shapes your heart to long for the future and final justice that Jesus will bring when he returns. Sharing in suffering is the refiner's fire for our being shaped to share in glory. And we need the testimony of the Holy Spirit to lift the eyes of our heart onto Christ's glory and away from my own suffering in the moment.

Last weekend, I put up a trampoline for the kids. It was a birthday presents for both of them. I got to working and noticed one piece was bent just a bit and would require some forceful assistance to bring it into conformity. So I took out the hammer and began to beat on this piece, beating turned to pounding. I was getting frustrated. Isaiah was watching me hammer and also was watching his father get frustrated, muttering things under his breath.

At some point I noticed Isaiah had disappeared, then he reappeared with a big smile on his face. He had gone into to his room to get his wooden tool box. He pulled out a toy hammer so that he could hammer like me. He started hammering the air, wanting to be like me, wanting to help me get the job done. I tell you it delighted my soul then and I'm still moved even as I tell you. My son, irrefutably my son, my adopted son, wants to be with me and wants to be like me.

That, friends, is the spirit of adoption. My son taught me about my adoption by my father. If I feel like that toward him and his silly efforts to be like me (a selfish, irritable, not-wanting-to-be-bothered, tired and weak dad) if it delights my soul to see him toddle around hoping to be like his daddy, what must our perfect father be like? Our perfect Father delights in his sons and daughters!

He loves you and is with you in this mission of restoring this world. Will you labor and struggle in the power of the Spirit because your Father loves you?