

“Abba, Father!”

Romans 8:12-17

Series: Romans 2022: Righteousness from God – Yay!

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Worship: Good, Good Father

Key Sentence: By the Spirit we are blessed as adopted, intimate children of God.

Outline:

I. By the Spirit we live as his children. (Romans 8:12-14)

II. By the Spirit we cry out to the Father. (Romans 8:15-16)

III. By the Spirit we suffer and inherit with Christ. (Romans 8:17)

Romans 8:12–17 (DSV) So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as children, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

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¹⁷and 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.

“Abba, Father!” Romans 8:12-17

If you look online you'll find many lists of famous adopted people. Most are celebrities: Faith Hill, the singer; Scott Hamilton, the ice skater; Steve Jobs, the founder of Microsoft, Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's. These lists also include people who were adopted by one step-parent, by grandparents or other kinship adoptions, including Nelson Mandela, Truman Capote, Gerald Ford and Simone Biles. These modern examples embody the ideal of adoption by people who truly love you and care for you as their own.

Probably the most famous adoption of antiquity was that of Augustus Caesar. Gaius Octavius was born in Rome in 63 BC. His father died when he was four. His mother raised him for several years. Later he was raised by his maternal grandmother Julia, the sister of Julius Caesar, the first Roman emperor. He was Caesar's great-nephew, and Caesar knew him because Octavius had made a name in the Roman army. Julius Caesar had no legal heirs. Before he was assassinated he wrote a will that named Gaius Octavius as his adopted son and legal heir. This was common in Rome, and it conferred on the adopted son the full status of an heir. Octavian inherited not only Caesar's earthly fortune but also much of his political status. Yet he didn't even know he was Caesar's adopted son until after Caesar had died. Even then it took almost 20 years of civil war before he was established as Emperor Caesar Augustus.

These two elements of adoption, the emotional investment common in our modern era and the conferring of status common in ancient practice are both present in our text this week, Romans 8:12-17. Here Paul teaches that by the Spirit we are blessed as adopted, intimate children of God. This adoption may be the highest privilege the Gospel offers. For no merit of our own, for no reason but his love, God adopts us into his own family through his Spirit and makes us kin and heirs with Jesus Christ. We can outline this in Romans 8 by noticing that verses 12-14 teach us that by the Spirit we live as sons and daughters of God. Verses 15 and 16 show that by the Spirit we cry out to the Father, and verse 17 adds that by the Spirit we suffer and inherit with Christ. Let's read this whole text. Romans 8:12-17 *So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as children, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”*

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Last week we saw that the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace. We saw that all who are believers have the Holy Spirit, and that he will one day give resurrection life to all believers. But Paul has more to say. “So then we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” We have a debt, but it’s to live a righteous life. We don’t owe the sinful nature anything. It has no claim on us. Paul doesn’t complete the thought here, but we can infer that our obligation is to the Spirit, to live according to his desires. If the indwelling Spirit has given us life, which he has (“your spirit is alive,” verse 10), we must not live according to the flesh, since that way lies death. No, we owe it to the indwelling Spirit to live out our God-given life and to put to death everything which threatens it or is incompatible with it.

Verse 13 sets the option before us as a solemn life-and-death alternative, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Stott calls this “a very significant verse on the neglected topic of ‘mortification’” which he defines as “a clear-sighted recognition of evil as evil, leading to such a decisive and radical repudiation of it that no imagery can do it justice except ‘putting to death.’” Elsewhere Paul called this a crucifixion of our fallen nature, with all its passions and desires. Jesus himself said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” When our mind is set on the Spirit, and not on the flesh we can crucify the activities and schemes of the sinful flesh, our lust, pride, anger and even our habitual self-centeredness.

How do we do this? Notice how carefully Paul chooses his words. You “put to death the deeds of the body,” but you do it “by the Spirit.” You and I do need to take initiative. The Spirit will empower us, yet we are responsible not just to ignore the things of the flesh but to actively oppose them. What is this like? Well, let’s say you were working on your gas water heater, and discovered that it had a gas leak. What would you do? You’d leave. That’s what the gas company says to do. That’s like turning your mind from the flesh to the Spirit. But once you were outside the house in the safety of the fresh air, you wouldn’t want to just leave it leaking in there. You’d go over to the main gas line and you’d turn the valve at the meter to cut off the gas. You don’t want to just escape sin, though that’s important, but you want to put it to death.

Martin Lloyd-Jones said we have to pull out our sins, look at them for what they are, then denounce and hate them before we'll be rid of them. As Jesus graphically expressed it, we must gouge out our offending eye and cut off our offending hand or foot. That is, if temptation comes to us through what we see, handle or visit, then we must be ruthless in not looking, not touching, not going, cutting off sin at the gates. Positively, Stott says, "we are to set our minds on the things the Spirit desires, set our hearts on things above, fill our thoughts with what is noble, right, pure and lovely." In this way "mortification" (putting sin to death) and "aspiration" (hungering and thirsting for what is good) are counterparts. This is the expulsive power of a new affection, but with a change in emphasis that makes us responsible not just to set our eyes on the things of the Spirit, but to actively battle the things of the flesh.

Verse 14 "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." Don't miss this. Here Paul introduces the grand truth of life in the Spirit, that it is life as children of God. This whole section pivots around this truth, that through the Spirit we live as intimate and beloved children of God. The first thing Paul does with this truth is to clarify the call of verse 13. Those who, in verse 13, put to death the things of the flesh by the Spirit are now called those who are being led by the Spirit. The two things are parallel, and the first manifestation of life in the Spirit is the beginning of victory over life in the flesh, Romans 7 being driven out more and more by Romans 8. Those who are thus find life in the Spirit, verse 13, are children of God, verse 14. The new, rich, full life which is enjoyed by those who put the things of the flesh to death, those who, as we saw last week are living in the fruit of the Spirit, this is the life of God's children. Stott says "we are granted a specially close, personal, loving relationship with our heavenly Father, immediate and bold access to him in prayer, membership in his globe spanning family and nomination as his heirs."

So the first benefit of our life as sons and daughters of God is precisely what we longed for at the end of Romans 7, and what aspired to last week in Romans 8: victory over the power of sin in our lives, the ability, by the Spirit, to put to death the misdeeds of the body. This includes turning to face our sins and learning to mortify them. But more foundational is what we said last week, having our mind set on the Spirit through the word, through prayer, through worship, and by constant, intimate communion with God, conversation which delights in him, which questions his will and discusses his way, which agrees with him and submits, and which fully depends on him in every effort to do and be what he wants. In fact the rest of our section is a beautiful picture of that delight and dependence, for it is by the Spirit that we cry out to God as Father and it is by the Spirit that we become heirs with His Son.

Verse 15: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as children, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” Both here and in the parallel section in Galatians 4:1-7, Paul uses the imagery of slavery and freedom to contrast our lives before and after we trusted Christ, the old age and the new. I understand the spirit of the old age to be my spirit, little s, not the Holy Spirit, capital S. That spirit was one of slavery to sin and led to fear, especially of God as our judge. The Spirit of our new life in Christ is the Holy Spirit, capital S. The freedom he brings gives us boldness to approach God as our Father. True, we are gonna serve somebody. We are still slaves of righteousness and of God, as we learned in Romans 6, but these slaveries are now the grateful service of adopted children.

That’s the beautiful truth of verse 15: we have received the Spirit of adoption as children, by whom we cry “Abba, Father!” The phrase “adoption as children” comes from a common Greek legal term. As F. F. Bruce put it “in the Roman world of the first century AD an adopted son was a son deliberately chosen by his adoptive father to perpetuate his name and inherit his estate; he was not at all inferior in status to a son born in the ordinary course of nature and might well enjoy the father's affection more fully and reproduce his character more worthily.” Because of the fall and because of our sin, the children of Adam are not naturally children of God in this intimate and binding sense. It is only because of God’s gracious choice and acceptance of us in Christ that we are now his sons and daughters. But because of that choice we are now as fully and freely his children as Christ himself is fully and freely His Son.

Therefore, like Christ, we can call God “Abba, Father.” Abba is from the Aramaic language, which was the common tongue of the Middle East starting in about 600 BC, and became an official language of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Some of the Old Testament, Ezra and parts of Daniel were written in Aramaic. It was probably the spoken language of Jesus and those he ministered to. On the other hand, the common written language of the Roman world was Greek. Almost all of the New Testament is written in Greek, translating the spoken words of Jesus into Greek 99 percent of the time. Very occasionally an Aramaic word is retained. In the Garden of Gethsemane the Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus cried out “Abba, Father” in his prayer of submission. Abba is the Aramaic word. Father, pater, is the Greek word. But it's almost certain that wherever Jesus is quoted as saying Father in the Gospels it is actually a translation of him actually saying “abba.” He uses this term in all his prayers except when quoting Psalm 22 on the cross. Probably the most significant place where this is true is at the beginning of the Lord’s prayer, where he teaches us to say “our Father, [our Abba] in heaven.

The key difference between “Father” and “Abba” is one of intimacy. “Abba” was probably the word infants learned for their fathers, like “dada” or “papa,” except it came to be used by adult children as well. It’s an address of intimacy and trust, with more respect than “dad” or “pop”. Many Bible teachers suggest the phrase “dearest Father” as an English equivalent, but I’m not sure that’s any good, since we hardly ever use the word “dearest.” In my life the solution has been not to translate it at all, but simply to take up the word “abba” as my own and address God as “Abba Father” especially in moments of intimacy or deep need. J. I. Packer once wrote “What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father. . . . Our highest privilege and deepest need is to experience the holy God as our loving Father, to approach Him without fear and to be assured of His fatherly care and concern.” That’s the privilege with which we have through our adoption. In the Babylonian Talmud slaves in a Jewish household were forbidden from using the term Abba in addressing the head of the family. That term was reserved for children. Once we were slaves, but when Jesus reconciled us to God he made us children who can cry “Abba!”

Paul ties this intimacy to the work of the Spirit. Romans 8:16 “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” You can look at these verses two ways, primarily because there is no punctuation in the Greek. Paul can be saying that we have received the Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry “Abba! Father!” which is how we’ve translated it. But if you link the phrase to verse 16 you could translate it “When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” The words are ours, but the witness is his, and in the Greek Paul has added a prefix to the word ‘witness’ that intensifies it. Paul meant that the Holy Spirit bears a strong inward witness to our spirit that we are God’s children. Paul says the same thing in Galatians 4:6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

He also gave a slightly different image in Romans 5:5 “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” One of the Holy Spirit’s most beautiful works is this ministry of inward assurance, as he convinces us of the reality of God’s love and of God’s fatherhood. We aren’t limited to just intellectual conviction about our redemption. We can have this heart level assurance. Stott points out that “Although we have no liberty to circumscribe God’s activity in any way, it seems from Christian biographies that God gives these assurances to his people chiefly when they pray.” Which is another reason we need to be spending time in prayer, in communion with God, which we saw last week as a key aspect of the mind set on the Spirit.

So we've seen that through the work of the Holy Spirit we are called to put to death the deeds of our sinful nature. More than that, through the Spirit's work we are able to cry out to our Abba Father. It's such an incredible privilege to be adopted, intimate children of God. Finally, we'll see next that by the Spirit, as God's children, we also suffer and inherit with Christ. Verse 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."

Though the Spirit isn't mentioned in this verse, Scripture makes it clear that He is the firstfruits of all that we inherit as children of God. Paul will say that directly down in verse 23 which we'll study next week. He also says it in Ephesians 1:13 "In him [that is Christ] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴who is the guarantee [or downpayment] of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." This inheritance will ultimately include all of God's promises for the future. Peter summarizes them in 1 Peter 1:4 "we have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead," and "to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you." This inheritance of life in the new heavens and the new earth, walking as sons and daughters of God in perfect provision and true human flourishing, is awesome.

But many commentators say there may be more here even than that. You can read in Romans 8:17 the richer, deeper thought that God himself is the inheritance of his children. This notion was not unfamiliar to Israel in Old Testament days. The Levites, for example, knew that they had been given no inheritance among their brothers because the Lord himself was their inheritance. And the Biblical writers could confidently affirm that God was their portion, a word used over and over in the Old Testament for an inheritance, as when dividing up the land. The Psalmist says "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." God is my inheritance.

But, Paul says, we are not only heirs, we are fellow heirs or joint heirs with Christ. Christians inherit the blessings of God's kingdom only through, and in, Christ. We are sons of God because we belong to the Son of God. We are heirs of God because of our union with the one who is the heir of all God's promises. Jesus, who is God the Son, is by nature the heir of all that is God's. Hebrews 1:2 says that "in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things," Yet he shares his inheritance with us.

2 Corinthians 8:9 “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” He even shares with us His glory. John 17:22 “The glory that you have given me I have given to them.”

All this reminds me of Mark Twain’s famous story *The Prince and the Pauper*, in which King Edward VI, as a boy, changes place with a poor boy named Tom Canty, nearly his twin. After many adventures among the poor of London, during which his father the king dies, the prince finally makes his way back to the palace. Tom Canty, in the meantime, has been forced to learn the art of being a prince, and is on the verge of being crowned king when Edward VI finally appears. After they work together to straighten out their identities, Edward is finally crowned king. But he takes Tom Canty into his palace, clothes him with his own clothes and makes him to share in his inheritance, though not his unique royalty. Tom Canty essentially becomes an adopted co-heir with the king and is known for the rest of his life as the King’s Ward.

Galatians 4:7 confirms this: “You are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir” Although it is still future, our inheritance is certain, since the Holy Spirit is himself its firstfruit, guaranteeing that the harvest will follow in due course. Thus the same indwelling Spirit who assures us that we are God's children also assures us that we are his heirs. There is a qualification, however: “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” Scripture often emphasizes and illustrates the principle that suffering is the path to glory. It was so for the Messiah, who said after his resurrection “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Romans 5:3 taught us that we too will suffer and will be improved by that suffering. Peter teaches this as clearly as Paul: “But rejoice as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” Stott says “The essence of discipleship is union with Christ, and this means identification with him in both his sufferings and his glory.”

So what have we seen? By the Spirit we receive the blessings of adopted, intimate children of God. By the Spirit we live as his children. By the Spirit we cry out to him as Abba Father, and by the Spirit we suffer and inherit with Christ.

I want to close today with three summary thoughts, one from me, one from Packer and one from Stott. My thought is this: this adoption is real. We become true children of the Father through adoption. The illustration Gail and I always use is the birth certificates of our adopted children, Christina and Michael.

When they were born they got birth certificates like most children. But those birth certificates no longer exist. Instead, on the day their adoption was finalized, they got new birth certificates that state clearly that they were born to Gail - and me, on their actual birthday in their actual birth place. They are absolutely and legally, as well as in terms of commitment and relationship, our children. So it is with us. As believers we are absolutely and legally God's children.

Second. Another thought from J I Packer. We could spend an additional hour on Packer's teaching on adoption in *Knowing God*. In summary, he says "Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification... To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater." That's the truth.

Finally, Stott, who summarizes what we've learned: "Looking back now over the first half of Romans 8, we have seen something of the multiple ministries of the Holy Spirit. He has liberated us from the bondage of the law, verse 2, while at the same time he empowers us to fulfil its just requirement, verse 4. We now live each day according to the Spirit and set our minds on his desires, verses 5 and 6. He lives in us, verse 9, gives life to our spirits, verse 10, and will one day give life to our bodies too, verse 11. His indwelling obliges us to live his way, verse 12, and his power enables us to put to death our misdeeds, verse 13. He leads us as God's children, verse 14 and bears witness to our spirit that this is what we are, verses 15 and 16. He himself is also the foretaste of our inheritance in glory, verse 17. It is his indwelling which makes the fundamental difference between Romans 7 and Romans 8." By the Spirit we receive the blessings of adopted, intimate children of God.