

The Christian Doctrine Of Adoption

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Introduction: Adoption is our highest privilege. We tend to emphasize justification, and rightly so, but actually adoption is the apex of salvation in the Bible. *"Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption... 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 worship and prayers and whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all."* (J.I. Packer from his chapter "The Sons Of God" in the book "Knowing God")

I. Where Did The Idea Come From?

- **While the Old Testament teaches that God is the Father and that Israel is His son, the imagery is still "in the bud" so to speak.** For example, nowhere in the Psalms do God's people address Him in prayer as Father – Jesus is the first Jew to do this. And Jesus (in the Lord's Prayer) teaches His followers to pray this way too. But in Romans 9:5 Paul says that to Israel belonged the privilege of adoption. So while it is a mistake to see the God of the OT as the angry God of judgment and the God of the NT as the Father God of love (remember – "our God is a consuming fire" is in the NT, in the Book of Hebrews), there is a fuller unveiling of the access we have to God as our father in the NT.
- **It is in the New Testament that the doctrine of adoption really is seen in the full flower.** Adoption is mentioned 5 places in the NT (Eph 1:5, Gal 4:5, Rom 8:15, 8:23, 9:5) and, interestingly, all of the places these letters were addressed to had significant Roman influence. This is because it is in the Roman adoption laws that Paul finds a fitting metaphor for the status and privilege that Jesus brought to His people. Adoption is not part of the ancient Jewish law and the Greek concept is much too weak. *"The profound truth of Roman adoption was that the adoptee was taken out of his previous state and placed in a new relationship of son to his new father....All his old debts are canceled, and in effect the adoptee started a new life as part of his new family....[On the one hand, the new father] owned all the [new offspring's] property, controlled his personal relationships, and had the rights of discipline. On the other hand, the father was liable for the actions of the adoptee, and each owed the other reciprocal duties of support and maintenance."* (Francis Lyall "Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles")
- **Adoption is a culmination.** As J.I. Packer says *"The revelation to the believer that God is his Father is in a sense, the climax of the Bible, just as it was a final step in revelatory process which the Bible records."* We see this in Galatians 3:26-4:7 where Paul says that Jesus came to make us sons and the Spirit was sent so that we would feel like sons.
- **Is Paul being sexist in his language?** No! In fact, in the Roman law daughters did not have the same privileges and so if Paul used the language of "sons and daughters" it would weaken what he wanted to say about the status and security of Christians. Paul is radical in that he calls both men and women "sons" of God, saying that in Christ women have the same status as men – even if the culture fails to recognize this!

II. The Status And Experience of Adoption

"26You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. 4:1What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. 2He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. 3So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. 4But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, 5to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. 6Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba,Father." 7So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir." (The Letter to the Galatians 3:26-4:7)

1. The Legal Status Of Adoption (vs. 5) Adoption, like justification, is a legal action, it is courtroom language. (Sanctification by way of contrast is the language of the hospital -- it's about healing!) Often when someone first becomes a Christian he thinks of his salvation only in negative terms, as debt taken away and things taken off of him (like guilt and wrath etc.) But our change in legal status involves more! We don't just get a pardon, we get the full rights as sons. God sees us as he sees his own Son!

2. The Experience Of Adoption -- Enjoying Our Status! (vs. 6) (I'm indebted to Tim Keller for this structure)

A. What is promised? An experience -- the Spirit is sent into our hearts. And He is sent to those who already have the status, this is something additional. Sinclair Ferguson's book "Children of the Living God" is great on this. He points out that in the prodigal son parable, when the son comes back, he comes back with very faulty repentance. He comes back and says "I'm not worthy to be called your son, let me work as one of your hired hands" [in effect let me work off my debt] Ferguson says, *"Although the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 is one of the best loved of the*

parables, the lesson it teaches us is often overlooked. Jesus was underlining the fact that the reality of the love of God for us is the last thing to dawn on us. As we fix our eyes on ourselves, our past failures, our present guilt, it seems impossible that the Father should love us, so many Christians go throughout life with the prodigal's suspicion. There concentration is on their sin and failure, all there thoughts are introspective, and that's why, in the Greek text of IJohn 3:1, John's statement about the Father's love begins "behold", behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us. Like the prodigal, we have a native inability to believe that salvation is completely by grace and love. We are slow to realize the implications of this. We have the status of sons, but we have the mind-set of a hired servant."

B. In the parable of the prodigal, while it looks like the prodigal son is being humble really he's not! Keller says, "What the prodigal does is what we all do, we all come in and say, I don't feel worthy, I don't want a Father/son relationship with God, I want a boss/employee relationship -- that's all I ask! Just give me a chance, let me try to clean up my life, let me work off my debt. I'm not asking for a lot, just give me my daily bread." Keller further explains, "When the prodigal comes to the Father and says let me be your servant, what he's really saying is I don't believe you are good enough to make me your son. This is not humility, it is an insult! He's saying, Father, I don't believe you are wealthy enough or generous enough to make me your son. When you refuse to live as a son and you live as a hired servant, it looks like humility but in reality it is an insult, you don't believe He's rich or generous."

C. The Spirit was sent so that we would feel like sons! Keller again, "What Paul is talking about here in Galatians 4:6 is something more than the objective fact of our sonship. You can be adopted and not experience your sonship. You can be forgiven and completely accepted and not feel that way. Paul is talking about a feeling." We must beware of trusting our feelings above God's Word. But, feelings have their vital place, and Paul is talking here about an experience! (Thomas Goodwin illustration about a boy walking with his dad down the road)

D. It is a cry! Paul says "Crying Abba Father" (NIV is too weak, it is a word of profound passion and feeling. A cry is something you experience, not something you claim. It is the word used of Jesus crying out on the cross) Keller says, "The normal Christian life is like this: Most of the time we are living the Christian life by claiming the objective truth of our sonship. You are saying, 'I'm not going to live like this, I am a son, I'm going to believe that I am fully accepted in the beloved.' And that's good, that's what you do, you claim it. But when the Spirit is doing this work, you don't have to tell yourself this, you know it, it is intuitive."

E. The experience of our adoption brings freedom and access in prayer and it brings a sense of assurance. Keller, "You are supposed to have assurance in the Christian life, but you never have control over the amount or the level of assurance, and what Paul talk's about here is a high level of assurance... Abba Father is baby talk. It is a word that expresses confidence. A child doesn't doubt unless you teach it to doubt. It just raises its hands and expects to be taken care of, the child just assumes that he or she is so important that you are going to drop everything to come and take care of them. And this is what the Spirit wants to come and show you about God."

F. What does it feel like? Listen to what Charles Spurgeon says in a sermon on Luke 15 on the words "the father kissed him" He points out that the son had the status, the ring, the robe, the fatted calf, but he didn't believe it and so the father kissed him. Then he says, "Some of us have known what it is to be too happy to live. The love of God has been so overwhelmingly experienced by us on a few occasions that we almost had to ask God to stop the delight, for we could not endure anymore. If God had not shielded his love and glory a bit, I think we would have died for joy."

[Now I don't understand all of this, but it is clear that this is what Galatians and Romans 8 are talking about!]

III. So How Do You Get It? "You can't divorce doctrine and experience, vs. 6-7 from verse 4-5. The Spirit of adoption comes because of the work of Christ. The Spirit of adoption's availability is based on the work of Christ, and therefore the Spirit of God's experience will be based on the work of Christ. What does that mean? It means you meditate on the truth of who Christ is and what He's done. Verse 6 is based on verses 4-5. You don't say I'm waiting for an experience, and you don't ask God for merely an experience. You go to God and you thank Him and praise Him for who He is and what He's done, and as you are doing that, as you are meditating on who He is and what's He's done, the Spirit will come." (Keller) If you are a Christian, have you experienced this? Have you prayed for it? Praise God for His promise, and ask Him to make Himself beautiful and believable to you today!

Concluding Applications:

- 1. You can understand this stuff even if you had a bad father.** The hymn "Praise My Soul The King Of Heaven" with the line "fatherlike he tends and spares us, well our feeble frame he knows. In His hands he gently bears us, rescues us from all our foes" was written by a man with a horrible father. But God was able to heal and reconstruct the father image!
- 2. Adoption should control the way we view the whole Christian life** (see Packer pg. 190) "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love..." (Ephesians 5:1)
- 3. Adoption helps us understand the role of the Spirit because He always works as the Spirit of adoption**
- 4. For further reading I would suggest:** "Knowing God" ("The Sons of God" chapter, J.I. Packer), "Children of the Living God" (Sinclair Ferguson), "From Fear To Freedom: Living As Sons And Daughters of God" (Rose Marie Miller)