

THE SPIRIT OF ADOPTION

Second in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *The Glorious Eighth Chapter of Romans*, from Romans 8:12-17
“*You have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’*” Romans 8:15

Henry Gregor Felson wrote to his son, “*The night you were born, I ceased being my father’s boy and became my son’s father. That night I began a whole new life.*” (From *Letters to a Teenage Son*) I remember what that initial moment of being a father was like. Barb and I held our first son alone together in her hospital room just hours after he was born. We stared down at him in wonder. And then he got the hiccups! We thought he might die! Hastily we punched the call button for the nurse. She took *forever* to get there! I pointed at Tim and choked out the words, “What should we do?” The nurse was used to new parents. Instead of saying, “You idiots!” she smiled and said, “It’s just the hiccups. He’ll be alright.” The only consolation I have is that my sons acted about the same way when their first babies were born!

We’ve started a seven part series of studies on *The Glorious Eighth Chapter of Romans*. We’re focusing particularly on the work of the Holy Spirit as that is revealed in Romans 8. Today is the second part, and our passage is verses 12-17, *The Spirit of Adoption*. We’ll take the passage in three parts. **1. The Difference Being a Christian Makes, 2. The Definition of our Relationship with God, and 3. The Diamonds in the Relationship.**

1. The Difference Being a Christian Makes. It’s interesting what some people expect to happen when they trust Christ as their Savior. For example, you may recall Matthew Murray who was the shooter last December who attacked the Youth with a Mission training center and New Life Church in Colorado Springs. He was shot and killed during his rampage. Afterwards, in his car police found a letter addressed to God that asked, “*Why didn’t any changes occur or any love or help come when I accepted you as my Lord and Savior?*” Maybe you thought there’d be bells and whistles. Perhaps you anticipated some kind of celestial choir would begin singing. I’ve known people who’ve felt great, soaring emotion when they became Christians. But most people feel little or nothing at all. That’s because changed feelings are not the primary effect that accompanies salvation. Instead, the apostle in verses 12-13 gives us three differences that take place which are much more profound than any feeling.

The first difference is that we no longer have to sin. In verse 12 Paul says, “*Brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.*” I must explain this. Last week we said that when we are sinners, by definition we are resistant or rebellious toward God. In Romans 6:17 the apostle says we are “*slaves of sin.*” A slave can only do what his master permits him to do. If our master is sin, you and I can never cease our resistance to God. We may do good or noble deeds as human beings define them. But our motives are still influenced by sin. Notice this phrase, “*to live according to the flesh.*” What does living according to the flesh mean? It’s that we want to do what benefits us, what satisfies our selfish desires. It may be our own comforts, our own craving for attention or praise or power. It may include base and

degraded things—lust and sex, theft, hatred, getting even with someone. Living according to the flesh means we insist on our own way. Billy Idol quipped one time, “*I love it when someone insults me. It means I don’t have to be nice anymore.*” He was saying that the only time he was nice to someone was when it benefited him. That’s what sin is by definition. Other people may be worse than we are, but sin colors everything we do. However, when Christ saves us the Holy Spirit cuts the chains of sin. He sets us free. He creates in us a desire to please Jesus. We can still commit sinful acts if we choose, but here’s the difference: We don’t have to sin! We’re not obligated to sin! We can with pure motives do truly good things that please God. That’s a big difference.

The second difference being a Christian makes is that we become better people. In verse 13 Paul says, “*If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*” Perhaps a hundred years ago the *New York Times* printed a famous correspondence under the title, *What is wrong with the world today*. Many people wrote in, but the best answer was also the shortest. “*Dear Sir, I am. Yours faithfully, G. K. Chesterton.*” The apostle Paul says that when the Holy Spirit enters and produces in us faith in Christ, he sets us free from the obligation to sin, and then he begins working in us so that we begin to conquer the bad or wicked things that we do. The Bible calls this process of becoming like Christ, *sanctification*.

Many Christians think that we change into better people by cultivating new habits or patterns in our lives. Then they get frustrated or discouraged when they don’t carry those new behaviors out. I’ve had married couples who are having trouble say to me, “I wish I could believe that he’ll change, or that she’ll change, but I’ve heard all the promises before, and nothing ever lasts.” Listen carefully to what I am about to say. Notice that the apostle doesn’t talk here about starting new, good behavior. He talks about putting to death the deeds of the flesh. In other words, the secret to a changed life is, stop doing the bad things. Do you have a temper? Work on getting it under control. Do you have a problem with sex? Starve the lust to death. Do you insist on your own way? Stop demanding what you want. Then the deeds of the flesh begin to die and the good things, the deeds of the Spirit, naturally grow up to take their place. It’s like pulling the weeds in the garden of your life. Ask God to help you. And his beautiful flowers will start to grow on their own!

The third difference being a Christian makes is that we don’t die, we live. Again, verse 13. “*If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*” John Owen was one of the great English Puritans. As he lay on his deathbed, Owen dictated a letter to a friend as his secretary copied it down. Owen said, “*I am still in the land of the living.*” “Stop!” Owen said. “Change that and say, ‘*I am yet in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living.*’” The Christian does not long remain in the land of the dying—this land in which we exist now and which seems to us so alive, but is really so dead. We will live!

2. The Definition of our Relationship with God. When you and I become Christians, the apostle says, it is not just about changes that the Holy Spirit makes in our lives. The Spirit also produces a huge change in our relationship with God. Once again,

the apostle teaches us three things about our relationship in verses 14-15. First, the apostle announces that we become sons of God. Many Christians never give any thought to their status as a son of God. We treat our relationship with God as if we are merely his acquaintances. Let me illustrate. I like to think of myself as a friend of our local congressman, Joe Wilson. We're not actually friends in the sense that I've ever had him in our home, and he's never invited me to his home. But he and I have been together several times. He's visited our church on a number of occasions. He once said some nice things about me and called me his friend on the floor of the House of Representatives. I think I could telephone him and he'd call me back. I'd certainly call him back if he called me! But that's as far as our relationship goes. For many Christians, that's about how they relate to God.

But in verse 14 Paul says, "*All who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.*" Notice the word *all*. Every true Christian is a son of God. And that's a lot closer relationship than just being God's friend. Here's a question: The word Paul uses in Greek which is translated *son* means just that—a son. To our ears, which have grown accustomed to politically correct gender neutral speech, we think this is strange. Some may even find it offensive. Why didn't Paul say we are *sons and daughters* of God? There is a very important reason, and to understand it we must go back to the cultural customs of the Roman Empire. In those days only a son could inherit the father's estate. Daughters could not. If there were several sons, the oldest son, the first-born son, inherited. Paul is making the point that when we become Christians our status is that of the first-born son. We are the father's heir. Don't get hung up on whether you think the way they did things two thousand years ago was fair or not. Understand Paul's point. You, the Christian, hold a very special and exalted position in relation to God the Father.

Second, Paul says we are *adopted* sons. The Holy Spirit performs a legal action when we become a Christian. It is proper to say that you and I become natural sons when the Holy Spirit regenerates us, that is, when he brings us alive so that we trust in Jesus as our savior. But we are much more than that. We have a legal standing as a son. The Father has bound us by law to himself. Martin Luther, after he married and had children, wrote, "*I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother....O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more significant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in his sight.*" That's what God has committed himself to doing for us. We are his adopted children, be we ever so helpless or disgusting in the messes we make.

Then, third, because of our status as sons adopted by God, Paul says we don't need to fear. He writes in verse 15, "*For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'*" We're not slaves, Paul says. A slave is always afraid that if he does not do what his master orders he will be punished, or perhaps lose the benefits he has gained because of faithful obedience to his master. I don't usually read the "Dear Abby" column in the newspaper, but on Friday I was drawn to a letter written to "Dear Abby" by a twelve-year-old girl from Tacoma, Washington. "*Dear Abby* (she wrote)

I'm...adopted. I have always known and have never felt less loved because of it. My mom always said that when you're adopted, you know that you are wanted and loved because nobody gets adopted by accident. My 14-year-old sister, 'Melissa,' is our parents' natural child. We were always close, but lately she has decided to be mean to me and tries to hurt me by telling me that I'm not her 'real' sister and our parents aren't my 'real' parents. This hurts very much. If I cry, she thinks it's funny. She never says it in front of our parents—she wouldn't dare. Melissa used to tease me when we were alone in our room, but now she does it in front of her friends, who also laugh at me when I get upset and cry. Melissa would be in big trouble if I told Mom, but I'm afraid it will make her even meaner. I don't want to get her in trouble because, in spite of this, I still love her. I just want her to stop being mean and start treating me like her real sister again. What should I do?" Basically Abby responded by telling the girl not to be afraid. Her adoptive parents are her real parents, she assured the girl, and if Melissa persists, she should clip the column and show it to her mother. The apostle Paul is saying something similar to us. Whenever you feel insecure in your relationship with God, when you begin to doubt that he loves you, clip out this fifteenth verse of Romans 8. You are God's real son. He has adopted you. He loves you. Don't be afraid!

3. The Diamonds in the Relationship. What does the fact that we are adopted by God mean in a practical way? Paul mentions four things. First, we are privileged to bear the family name. In verse 16 he writes, "*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*" Notice that here Paul uses a different term to describe our status. He says we are *children of God*. He is no longer talking about our legal relationship. He's saying that every Christian is tied to God by the new birth. Men and women, boys and girls: we are his children. He is our Father. We are his kids. And we are brothers and sisters to each other. (So don't be a "Melissa" in the way you treat your fellow believers!) We are part of his family. We each bear the family name. We are "Christians."

The second is that as children of God, Paul says we have the right of intimate access to the Father. Verse 15: "*You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'*" The word *Abba* is the little child's name for his daddy. It's one of the first words a baby learns to say. In English the child calls her daddy, *Da Da*. In Hebrew it was *Abba*. Hear how similar those names sound! In the garden of Gethsemane as Jesus was praying before he was arrested, he cried out to the Father in his agony and he used this name, *Abba!*" John Huffman was one of the first pastors I served under at the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. In one sermon John described the wondrous scene in Revelation 4. The church is gathered in heaven. The Almighty is on his throne. And then a little child comes crawling across the sea of glass, past the twenty-four elders, up the steps of the throne, and onto his Father's lap. And then he cries out, "Daddy!" That little child is you and me!

The third diamond in our relationship with God is that we are heirs. In verse 17 Paul says, if we are children, then we are "*heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.*" In Luke 12:32 Jesus said to his disciples, "*Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom.*" Who is the king? It is our savior

Jesus. And his kingdom is our kingdom. No matter how hard life is for you now, no matter how discouraged you may be, oh, there is a great inheritance stored up for you!

Finally, the fourth diamond is coming glory. The end of verse 17 promises that we will also be “*glorified with Him.*” When everything is wrapped up, Jesus will receive the glory due him. And we will receive it with him! There was a father who really loved his family. He wanted them to enjoy a wonderful vacation. They were going to go camping up and down the coast of California. The dad helped in the planning. Every day was scheduled, every place they would stop. Even the highways they would travel. But when the time to leave came, the father announced that he would not be able to go with them. “I’ve got an important business obligation,” he said. “I’m so sorry I can’t go with you. But you’ll have a wonderful time.” So Mom and the kids climbed into the van which was packed with everything they’d need, and off they went. But the father had planned something he hadn’t told them about. He arranged for a business associate to fly him to California and drop him off on the road where his family would pass. And there he sat on his suitcase, waiting. When he spotted the familiar van, he stood up with a huge grin on his face and stuck out his thumb like a hitchhiker begging for a ride. And oh, what a great time they all had together! Beloved, we’re on the road of life. It seems as if the Father has left us to go on alone, but look! There he is, standing beside the road with his thumb stuck out. We’re going on the great vacation together! Never forget it.

How do we know all of this is true? How do we know you and I are in fact sons of God? In verse 16 Paul says, “*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*” God whispers it to us! How does he do that? First, you can tell you are a son of God if as verse 13 says, “*you are putting to death the deeds of the body.*” Are you making progress in becoming like Jesus and shedding bit by bit the sinful things you used to do? Second, you’ll know if as Paul says in verse 14, “*you are being led by the Spirit of God.*” In other words, do you desire God’s will to be done in your life? Are you following him in your decisions and in your choices? Third, you can know you are God’s child by your affirmation of faith. Verse 15 says, “*We cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’*” Do you claim Christ as your savior? Do you worship the living God? Finally, you can be assured of your standing with God if you persevere in your faith. Paul says in verse 17, “*if we suffer with Him.*” Some of you will remember how in October 1983 Muslim terrorists in Beirut blew up a hotel which was used as the U. S. headquarters and as a barracks for the Marines. A lot of our guys were killed. One Marine had been terribly injured. He lay in the hospital wrapped in bandages, with tubes and wires going into and out of his body. Marine Corps Commandant, General Paul Kelly, visited him. The marine could not speak, but he indicated he wanted to write something. Someone produced paper and pen appeared, and the marine painfully scratched two words on the pad: *Semper Fi*—Always faithful—the Marine motto. That’s the Christian, hanging on to the end. If you endure with Christ, no matter how difficult life may be, it is the greatest assurance you can have of your relationship with God, that you are his adopted son!

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