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Romans 8:14-17

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The Promise of Adoption

SERIES: *His Precious and Magnificent Promises*

Imagine yourself walking along the busy streets of San Francisco one night and you see a dirty young boy begging on the street. He's sitting on the sidewalk, slumped against a building with a lifeless look in his eyes as you walk by. Your heart goes out to him. You wonder how this could have happened to someone so young. You wonder where his parents are. But imagine your reaction if just as you passed him by he got up and started running towards you, calling out to you, "Mother," or "Father." Now you've never seen this child before. And frankly, in the midst of this busy street and in front of all these people, you don't appreciate him calling you his mother or father! He had no right to do that, no matter how much he wanted it to be true. But what if you took that child and brought him home? What if you cleaned him up and fed him and gave him a place to sleep? What if you even adopted him into your family and called him your son? Then he has the right to call you "Mother" or "Father." The law will even recognize that right. But the right and the authority to be your son must be granted by you.

We've been looking at the promises of God from Romans 8. This morning we come to one of the most precious of those promises. It's the promise of sonship. It's the promise that God himself has brought us home, cleaned us up, sat us at his table, and adopted us as his sons. The choice was made not by us, but by God. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 8:14-17.

"For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. 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!' The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him."

I. We are adopted sons of God.

This is the first time in this great letter to the church at Rome that Paul uses this term, "the sons of God." Let me clarify something right off the bat. When he uses this term he's referring to both men and women. This is a generic term that includes both genders. Each person

who has received the gift of salvation through faith in Christ is a son of God. The reason this term is used is because Christ himself was a Son and because in that society there were certain rights uniquely connected with sonship. But it's also important to understand that not everyone is a son of God. Galatians 5:26 says, **"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."** Faith in Christ is what makes you a son of God. It's true that we're all created by God. In a kind of general and generic sense, he's the father of all of us, but that's not what Paul is talking about here in Romans. He's talking about a special status that only belongs to those in Christ.

We become a son of God through adoption. That's why he talks here about "the spirit of adoption." We're blessed to have many families here at CPC with adopted children. I can't tell you how many adopted babies I've dedicated right here on this stage. It's funny, in one sense I don't even think of them as adopted. Often times I'm even amazed at how they grow up to look just like their adoptive parents! But in another sense, when I have a baby up here who I know was adopted, it's kind of special. Usually, the parents have waited a long time, with many tears. Sometimes they've traveled great distances to bring that child home. One thing is for sure: that child truly belongs to them; he or she has the full status of son or daughter. If there are other children of natural birth, there's no difference at all.

Some of you may be wondering right now, "What's this business about adoption? I thought we were born into God's family. Didn't Jesus talk about being born again? If we're born again, why do we have to be adopted?" That's a good question. The fact is, we're both born and adopted into his family. Both of these metaphors are used because both communicate something important about our belonging to the family of God. We're said to be adopted because this reminds us that we're not naturally part of the family of God. We're actually born into Adam's family. We inherit Adam's sin nature; his defects; his problems. We're sons of Adam. But God has graciously taken us out of that family and adopted us into his family. Adoption reminds us that we can never take our sonship for granted. It's only by the grace of God that we're his sons. But it's also true that, in another sense, we're born into God's family. Not only does he legally adopt us but he also regenerates us; he

puts his new life in us so that we actually share his nature. That's why Peter can say we've been made "partakers of the divine nature." We've been born into his family and we have his life within us.

So both of these statements are true. This is a wonderful promise. If you have trusted Christ, you are a son of the living God, adopted and born into his family. Because you're his son, the Father loves you, protects you, provides for you, plans for you, listens to you, enjoys you, corrects you, and openly claims you as his own. I know many of your children. I really like many of your children. I can see that they're great kids. But I have to tell you, they're not like my children. My children, of course, are considerably superior to yours! Every year that I coach my son's team in Little League baseball, I get a team picture. I'm always proud of all those boys. That's MY team! But whose face do you think I look for first in that picture? I look for my son. Because I have a tie with him that's different. Do you know that's how God thinks of you? You're his son. He looks for you first. You have certain privileges that others don't have. You have access to him at all times. There is an intimacy that you have with him that others don't share.

But this raises another very important question. If all of this depends on being a son of God, how can I be sure that I am a son? We've all asked that question at one time or another. Some of have lost a lot of sleep over that question. It's an important question because so much hangs on the answer. And I believe God wants us to know; he wants us to be sure; he wants us to enjoy our status as sons. So, how can we know? This passage before us answers that very question. There are three very practical tests it gives us to determine if we're sons. All of them have to do in some way with the Holy Spirit.

II. We know we are sons of God because the Spirit leads us.

The first test comes out of the statement Paul makes in v. 14. All who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. How do you know if you are a son? Ask yourself, am I led by the Spirit of God?

Here in Romans 8 Paul has spoken of walking according to the Spirit in contrast to walking in the flesh. The flesh, of course, is Paul's term for our sinful nature. Here he talks about being led by the Spirit. What does that mean? When someone leads me, that implies that I'm following them; I'm doing what they're telling me to do; I'm going where they want me to go. When you're led by the Spirit, you're

allowing HIM rather than the flesh to lead you and direct you. Look back up at v. 13. He says, "**if you, by the Spirit, are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.**" First and foremost, to be led by the Spirit means we do just what it says there. It means the flesh is no longer the controlling principle of my life. The Spirit controls me and by the Spirit I can identify and put to death the deeds of the flesh. When the Spirit controls us in that way, we'll manifest his fruit in our life as well: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control.

When you're led by the Spirit, you'll also hunger for his word. Jesus talked about the Spirit leading us into all truth, and there will be a sense of that. Most of you have experienced that. The Bible has become alive to you. It's more than just a book; it's spiritual food that you can't live without. Have you ever been reading a passage of Scripture or listening to a sermon and had something just leap right off the page at you. All of a sudden you know that the Lord is speaking to you? Sometimes it's a word of correction, isn't it? The Lord says, "You have to stop doing that." Or, "You need to go and talk to that person and make it right." That's part of what it means to be led by the Spirit.

It also means that you long to talk to him. You can't live without spending time with him in prayer; that prayer arises from your heart as naturally as breath from your mouth. Have you ever felt that you just had to talk to the Lord? Perhaps you've gone for some time without talking to him, and you have felt the pressure build up in your soul like water building up around a clogged drain. And then you come to him and you begin to unburden yourself. It's like you've swept away the debris from the drain and there is a great release of pressure on your soul. The Spirit gives us that desire to pray.

You can see that these are things you can observe. This is proof by observation. Am I a son of God? Well, does the Spirit of God lead me in these ways? Another thing he does is he gives us a new love and connection with our new brothers and sisters in Christ. After I became a Christian I became best friends with a guy who I regarded as a bitter enemy prior to that. I found I had this bond with him right away. I had it with others as well. I made friends with people I never would have given a second thought to prior to that. I found that I cared for them and had something in common with them that was so much deeper and richer than the differences we had in the flesh.

These are the ways we know if we're being led by the Spirit, and if we're being led by the Spirit, we're sons of God. If you see these outward signs, you know you're a son.

III. We know we are sons of God because the Spirit assures us.

There is another level of assurance that Paul speaks of in these verses as well. It comes out in vv. 15,16. Having just talked about being led by the Spirit, he wants us to know that we're not led around by the nose like a slave. The Spirit who comes to reside in us is a Spirit of adoption, not a spirit of slavery. We don't obey out of fear, like a slave; we obey out of love, like an adopted son.

Ray Stedman tells a story out of his boyhood in Montana that illustrates the difference between these two approaches. He was invited to visit a well known wealthy ranch by one of the hired men. As the two of them came up to an imposing ranch house, the hired hand didn't take him into the house. Instead, he took him to the bunkhouse out back. Ray asked him what it was like in the ranch house, and he said, "Well, I can't take you in there; that belongs to the family."

Ray remembers seeing a beautiful palomino horse in the pasture, and telling the hired hand how much he wanted to ride that horse. But he said, "I'm sorry, you can't; that belongs to the family." All day long, Ray was frustrated because everything he wanted to do, his friend couldn't let him do because he was only a hired man.

But later on, Ray got to know the son of that family, a boy of his own age, and do you know what they did? They rode that palomino horse all over the place, and they went into the house, and they even went into the kitchen and helped themselves to food in the refrigerator – anything they wanted – they made themselves perfectly at home.

That's the difference between a son and a slave. A son has greater freedom than a slave or even a hired hand. And it's God's Spirit of adoption who makes that real in our lives. Paul says by that Spirit we cry out, "Abba, Father." This word, Abba, is an Aramaic word. Children who spoke that language would use that word to address their father. It was a respectful but also an affectionate way of speaking to their father, much like "Daddy" is for us. What's interesting is that the Jews didn't use that term to refer to God. It was too intimate of an expression. But it's that kind of fearless intimacy with God that the Spirit inspires within us. If you've ever experienced that heart cry to God, like that of a much loved child to a father, you can be sure you're his son.

Sometimes that cry is just a desire to be with him. Joni Eareckson Tada recalls the comment of one boy at the end of a retreat for the disabled. People at the retreat were asked to tell what the week had meant to them, and this little down syndrome, freckle-faced boy stood up. Everyone was excited to hear what he would say because he had won the hearts of everyone. He took the microphone, put it right

up to his mouth and said, "Let's go home!" Later his mom told Joni that he said that because he missed his dad who had to stay home to work. You know, it's wonderful being down here with the family, but sometimes don't you just want to be home with the father?

But there is even a deeper level of assurance. In v.16 Paul says the Spirit of God bears witness with our human spirit that we're children of God. So we cry out to him "Abba, Father," but then he also speaks to us; he assures us that we belong to him. Back then two witnesses were needed to establish a truth in a courtroom. Here then are two witnesses to our sonship: God's Spirit and my spirit.

As most of you know, I became a Christian right around the time I graduated from high school. I was a pretty typical teenager of the late sixties and early seventies. I was involved in a lot of the wrong stuff. And the moment I met Christ I knew there were things that would have to change; things that I would have to stop doing. And I began to change. But then I went away to college and I found myself falling back into the same shameful things I used to do. But deep in my heart there was always a sense that I belonged to God. There was a tie with God that I couldn't deny. I felt miserable when I would get back to my dorm room. I knew I was grieving my heavenly Father. Before too long I became so miserable that I just gave in. And when I did, I felt so much better.

That's the witness of the Spirit. Being led by the Spirit is observable and rational. But the witness of the Spirit is internal and experienced on more of an emotional level. The first is observed in radical obedience; the second is felt in fearless intimacy.

IV. We know we are sons of God because we suffer with him.

But there is one more thing here. In v. 17 Paul gets to thinking about this idea of being sons and he wants to add one more thing. He says if we're sons, we're also heirs; heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. He's talking about our inheritance in heaven as sons. The Spirit also plays an important role in this. In Ephesians the Holy Spirit is called "the pledge of our inheritance." The idea is that he's like a down payment. He's God's guarantee that the day will come when we'll receive our full inheritance as sons of God. We're not going to spend a lot of time on this, because it is the theme of the next section which we'll look at next week. But notice that Paul ties this to another test of our sonship. He says, "if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him."

This past week Tiger Woods married a Swedish supermodel. No doubt there are a lot of wonderful benefits to being married to him. She will never want for money or all the things that money can buy. She will be famous, the envy of a lot of women. But with that she will also experience some suffering. When she chose to marry Tiger Woods she also chose to endure a certain amount of hardship. It's a package deal. She will be hounded by news hounds and curious sightseers. She will have to endure Tiger's ups and downs as a golfer. There is always a costly side to glory. It's the same with us. Following Christ will lead us to glory, but the path to glory runs through suffering.

There are all kinds of ways we will suffer. For some it's the suffering of being rejected, fired or ignored because of our identification with Christ. I heard about a 15-year-old girl this past week who wrote a paper for her biology teacher on stem cell research. She was against it because it violated what she believed was a preborn child's right to life. It was a conviction she came to because of her faith. She got a zero on that paper because her teacher disagreed with her. For others it's the suffering of staying in a difficult marriage because of your commitment to Christ. For still others it's the suffering of living without certain comforts because of your commitment to give a percentage of your income away to the work of the Kingdom. There are those who suffer with him through an illness like cancer. If you suffer with him, you can know that you're a son. Don't worry about making that happen. Just follow Jesus. It will be automatic.

CONCLUSION

In the past couple of weeks, we have lost two very dear people from our church body. I've been thinking about how different they were, but also how similar. Mary Dawn had an illness that disfigured her skin. Her face and her body were covered with tumors that we all could see. She never married. She didn't have much by way of material things. Rio, on the other hand, was a well-known celebrity in her native Philippines. She was a beauty queen; she was a talk show host. She married into one of the wealthiest families in the Philippines. She had it all.

They were so different, but they had two things in common. First of all, they both had cancer, and that cancer eventually took each of their lives. But both of them accepted their suffering as part of God's plan for them. You see, more importantly, they were both sons of God. They both knew the same fearless intimacy with God; the Spirit of adoption indwelt them and they both knew the same heart cry of "Abba, Father." Being sons, they were both led by the Spirit. You could see the signs of radical holiness in their lives. And because they both were sons, they were also heirs. And despite all their outward differences, they both received the same glorious inheritance as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. In the end, that's really the most important thing about us.