



I want you to imagine you're in a theater. Not a theater in a mall on the Peninsula, but a theater in the ancient Greek city of Corinth, the likely place where Paul wrote this letter to the Romans. We're in an ancient open air theater that seats about 15,000 people. We've gone back in time and as we walked in, we see there is a play being performed. It's a Greek tragedy. You are familiar with Greek tragedies. They start out tragic, and as the play progresses they get more and more tragic. The usual outcome is the characters either die or commit suicide. The Greek play that we are watching is called "Oedipus Rex." It's a play known well by most in the Roman and Greek culture.

In the play, King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes have been warned in an oracle that when they have a son, he will cause their family grave damage. So King Laius takes his baby's feet and pins them together and abandons the baby in a field on a mountain-side. A shepherd finds the baby and names him Oedipus, which means "swollen feet." Oedipus is then raised by King Polymus.

Now the part about King Laius abandoning his baby doesn't shock the viewers here, because child abandonment was not uncommon in ancient Roman culture. When a baby was born and set at the father's feet, the father either picks up the baby, thereby claiming it, or he turned around and walked away rejecting his baby. Maybe he wanted a boy and he got a girl. Maybe he wanted a girl and got a boy. Maybe he detects something about the child that displeases him.

It would be rare for a baby to be killed. Instead, the child would be left somewhere, abandoned and exposed to the elements for the gods to decide his fate. If the gods were in their favor the child would be adopted. In this case Oedipus was adopted.

Oedipus grew up and eventually became a king in his own right. Later in the play we learn that in a case of ancient road rage, Oedipus killed a man on a chariot and later marries a Queen in Corinth. The tragedy progresses: Late in the play he learns that the man he killed on that ancient road was actually his biological father who had abandoned him; the father he never knew. And late in the play he learns that the beautiful Queen he married was actually Jocasta, his mother; the mother who had abandoned him and the mother he never knew. The play ends with his mother committing suicide by hanging herself with her own hair as the noose. And then Oedipus sticks pins in his eyes and lives in tormented exile for the rest of his life. Like I said, typical Greek tragedy.

It's to these people who understand the despair of abandonment that Paul writes these beautiful words we will look at today. But the kind of adoption that Paul is teaching us doesn't end tragically like the end of Oedipus Rex.

As we continue our journey through Romans, we have seen that the early chapters of Romans do indeed play out like a Greek tragedy. Paul clearly and painfully points out to us that we are lost in our depravity—no hope, only despair. We learned that no matter how hard we try to be good and religious and live by the law, we will fall short.

But in Romans chapter 3 verse 21 this Greek tragedy turns into a Love Letter. We are blessed to read that God is full of hope and power and offers us forgiveness and redemption. We learn that the only hope for man is a righteousness that comes to us from another source. That source is Jesus. He justifies us. He imparts his righteousness to us and places his Spirit in us. By faith we can receive the Good News of Christ and become regenerated or born again and receive the gift of eternal life.

Paul goes on to tell us that we also have been given the capacity to change while here on earth. He tells us that God's Spirit is put in us and gives us life and has the goal of making us more like him by transforming us to think, feel, and act more like him. And now we will spend the rest of our lives on earth learning what it means to be led by the Spirit and become transformed from the inside out.

If we want to understand what a Christian is we need to understand the stark contrast between being a slave and being a son. We need to understand the difference between being abandoned and on our own to being adopted as a child of God. If we want to better understand what it means to be "led by the Spirit" in this life, we need to understand how it is connected to our place in Christ because we have been divinely adopted. Remember our passage last week? Verse 13 is saying because the Holy Spirit is in us, we really can triumph over the sin in us. And how can this be true? Because we are children of God.

Who are Children of God?

For (because) those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God (Romans 8:14).

In the original language, Paul uses the words "sons of God" instead of the NIV translation to English "children of God." Seems like a minor difference, but it isn't. In Paul's ancient audience all

children didn't receive the same inheritance. The sons, in particular the first born son, not the daughters, received the bulk of the inheritance. Paul is saying in God's kingdom all children of God, male or female, son or daughter will receive all the rights and privileges of a first born son. In God's kingdom there is no male or female, no son or daughter. But Paul uses the term "son" to make the point that men and women, children of God, inherit something great. Children, or Sons of God, comes with incredible benefits like being able to be led by the Spirit.

But the big question remains in this verse: How does the Holy Spirit lead his children? There are a lot of thoughts on this. I remember having lunch with a friend years ago who told me his story of when he was strung out on drugs in a Los Angeles hotel room, and he was watching a TV preacher and he got on his knees and prayed to receive Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and he experienced an instant deliverance from wanting drugs. For him it was an instant putting to death the misdeeds of the body. I have found that this kind of leading and deliverance is rare. My experience is that the leading of the Spirit that produces real change is a process that is an ongoing work of God in the life of someone connected to God and to his loving, truth telling and grace-filled church family.

I think a lot of us have on occasion sensed the Spirit's leading when outward circumstances align in such a way that we sense in our heart that God was leading a certain direction or toward a certain decision. Yesterday, a couple of ladies were praying at the church. When I showed up to do a little work I discovered that the power was out. I went over to them, and we prayed. I then went back into my office to gather some things and the power was back on. Was I led by the spirit to approach them to pray? Were they led by the spirit to pray? I think so. But again this kind of story is rare. I celebrate it as God's grace to me. But being led by the Spirit is not like having a mysterious power at my beckon call like a personal genie in a lamp I can expect to convenience me with electricity for Wifi.

There are books and study guides out there on how to be led by the Spirit. But I have found that the best intentioned study guides tend to fall back onto lists of do's and don't's. We know through our Study in Romans how Paul feels about lists of do's and don't's. External rules cannot bring about the internal change that makes us more like Jesus.

What I have learned about being led by the Spirit are the same things I have learned about growing any relationship. If I want a relationship with someone, I spend time with them, I seek to get to know them. I want to know what the person thinks, feels and does. What do they know? What are they passionate about? Why do they do things the way they do them? I want to feel what he feels, to enjoy, to learn, to be inspired and changed in his presence.

Being led by the Spirit happens when I spend time with God, When I take advantage of that time he renews my mind. He works in my intellect. He challenges what I believe. When I discover things that don't align with what I have believed, he helps me change my mind. How does this happen? Well, I've learned that the Spirit renews my mind when I am reading and being taught God's Word, the Bible.

Here is a test. Has the Holy Spirit been leading you by enlightening your mind through reading His Word? Have you discovered things about yourself or about God? Are there things you have learned about God's ways that you didn't know before and you now realize are true? Are you beginning to think differently and live differently? If this is happening you are being led by the Spirit. And the fruit of being led is obedience. Now that is something to celebrate!

Also, I know I am being led by the Spirit when he stirs in my heart. The heart is the seat of our emotions and passions. Of course I want to learn what I can about God, but I also know I am being led when I want to be with God. I begin to miss him when I am not connecting to him. Sure, I spend time with him in my favorite chair at home, but I also have grown to realize that he goes with me when I get up from that chair and go about my day. As I am led by the Spirit, I grow to sense his presence throughout the day to ask him to prevail in situations, to thank him, to grumble to him when I'm having a tough day. Being led by the Spirit is embracing this intimate connection to him that is available because we are children of God.

Here is another test. Are you a person who wants to please his heavenly Father? Are you a person who is loving what he loves more and more, and hating what he hates more and more? For a person led by the Spirit, spending time is a heart passion, not a duty. Someone who is led by the Spirit feels the greatest joy when God is glorified on earth and in heaven.

Being led by the Spirit is not something that happens when we do things on a list out of a sense of duty. Being led by the Spirit is the product of what an adopted child now wants from his new Father who loves his child so much and wants to guide his child into new places to experience the benefits and victories of being a child of God led by the Spirit. *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!"* (1 John 3:1).

Now we move into verses 15-17. These are some of my most favorite verses in all of Romans. We are going to see and celebrate the privileges that are lavished on us, his children, by a loving Father as we are led by the Spirit of God. We celebrate that...

Children of God are Lavished with Security

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; (v. 15a).

An adopted child no longer must fear. Instead he can enjoy sonship. Think about it in terms of an employee or servant who obeys out of fear and punishment. But a healthy child/parent relationship is not characterized by fear of losing the relationship. There is such a stark difference between a slave and a son. A slave works under threat of pain or loss or punishment or “pay back.” As a son I am secure because I now can see God’s correction not as punitive, but as loving instruction for my own good. A slave works with the insecurity of thinking, “If I slip up, my master might beat me.” As a son I am secure because I know if I slip up, my father will forgive me.

Children of God are Lavished with Authority

... rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship (v. 15b).

In a house, servants have no authority. They can only do what they are told. But under parents, children have authority in the house; they are more than servants. This image of adoption tells us that no one is born into a true relationship with God. The fact that we “receive” our sonship status proves that there was a time when we were lost, we were not naturally God’s children. Adoption is the process by which a person is taken from one family, or no family, and placed into a new family. Paul is saying, children of God, understand that you have been removed from the family of Adam (or Satan) and placed in the family of God with all the authority that goes with the new family. We have been given authority over sin and the devil.

It’s also important for us to remember that this adoption was expensive. The father paid a price to win our adoption. He sacrificed his only begotten Son so he could adopt us as his sons. And he sacrificed his only begotten Son to give us his Spirit so we could have the power and authority to break the power of sin and the devil in our own lives. When we are struggling in the battles of our flesh, I encourage each of us to remember God loved us so much that he paid the ultimate price so we can be led by the Spirit and experience victories over sin.

Children of God are Lavished with Intimacy

And by him we cry, “Abba, Father” (v. 15c).

For adopted children, God is not just a kinder, gentler master, he is now dad. We need to know the original language here. Abba was a term that translates “daddy.” It’s a term of greatest intimacy. A child doesn’t often address his father as “Father.” Likely it’s a different term like dad or daddy. Because of adoption we can approach the all powerful creator of the Universe who sustains every atom in existence moment by moment as daddy.

I think Paul is especially speaking to those who have felt abandoned in their life. Maybe you were abandoned by your father, maybe it was your mother. Maybe you were abandoned by a friend. Maybe by your spouse, a child, a company. You are

tender. You are still raw. It still makes you angry. Know that your Spiritual Father, your Spiritual Dad, will never abandon you.

Here is a picture of me and my dad circa 1965. I’m walking behind my dad and his lawn mower with a toy lawn mower. Guess which one is me? I am following in my daddy’s footsteps, imitating my dad. It’s what boys do. It’s tender. My heart was tender. My dad could have stepped on my heart, but he didn’t. I am so thankful that my dad didn’t imitate his father. My dad’s father left my dad’s mother when my dad was young. My dad was raised by a single mom. He was the new kid at school every year having to fight the bully. I found out recently that years ago my dad received a letter from the Salvation Army that announced that his dad had died on skid row in New York City of alcohol abuse. I don’t understand abandonment. My dad does. Some of you here do as well. You had no one to walk behind with your toy lawn mower. You suffer like a character in a Greek tragedy.

As children of God who are led by the Spirit we can know that we will never be abandoned by Abba Father. All he wants with us is intimacy. If you have come to know Jesus, know that your most defining moment of your life is not when someone threw you out, when someone abandoned you. Your defining moment is the time when God took you in! Your defining moment is when God picked you out, picked you up, and took you home. Paul is telling us in Romans 8 that God is not telling us how to behave; he is telling us that we belong. Our most defining moment is when he adopted you. And nothing can change that.

Children of God are Lavished with Assurance

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children (v. 16).

Testifying—the word means an inner witness in the heart. A sense that yes, he really loves us and he really is leading us. How can we know that we are children of God? Because the Spirit bears witness or testifies along with our spirit that we are his.

Notice that Paul is saying that our spirit already is testifying. We already have evidence that we are children of God. We see our lives changing and growing. All these pieces of evidence lead our spirit (hearts) to have a measure of confidence that we really are his. And Paul is saying there are times when we need a special sense of God’s spirit and that is when the Spirit of God comes along in a special way and testifies to our heart of his presence and love and power. It’s in those times when we are compelled to cry out “Abba Father” because we need to be deeply assured that he is really there and working in our lives when things don’t make sense around us. It’s at those times that we especially need to be assured that we are truly God’s children.

Children of God are Lavished with an Inheritance

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 (v. 17).

I'm not a god. But I'm as much of a son as the Son of God? It's incredible that God would even use me and Jesus in the same sentence when he talks about a spiritual inheritance. If we are children of God, we are heirs. This means we have an incredible future.

The Romans and Greeks had a ceremony they went through when they adopted. The ceremony was called *toga virilis* which literally means the placing of the son. As long as a child was under the legal age of inheritance, they were not really considered to be a full fledged member of the family. They did not enjoy the rights and privileges of family membership. But when they became adults, the legal age of inheritance, the dad would take the toga off his back and place it on the back of his grown-up child and pronounce them to be a full-fledged member of the family with all the rights and privileges. In the mind of God this *toga virilis* took place when he adopted us as his children. God's toga was placed on us when we received Christ as Savior.

Before Julie and I got on an airplane a few weeks ago, we had our wills re-written. We now have two adult children. It was time because now we view our children of the age to become heirs. So their mother and I took off our togas and put them on the backs of our daughters. They are now heirs to my basketball card collection!

Children of God are Lavished with the Family Likeness

... if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (v. 17).

At first glance this notion of family likeness is just a pleasant addendum to these privileges. As a child of God we will come to resemble our parent. Nice thought. But what Paul is saying is as adopted children, God implants Christ's nature in us, and as we come to resemble God as we are led by the Spirit, we will bear the likeness of suffering. I must admit that when I look at this, it's unsettling. As I reflect on this, what settles me down is that persecution is something our loving Father may allow so we can become more like him, maybe to taste just a bit of what it was like to be obedient to the point of death before we share in his glory.

One more Roman adoption story... If a Roman family chose to adopt a child, they would go to court and go before a judge, and there the adopting father would present a legal case to justify his right to adopt the child. This was called *vindicatio*, when the judge ruled the case complete in the eyes of the law and the adopted person became a new person. All his debts and obligations connected with his previous family were erased. It became as if his debts and obligations never existed.

Vindicatio looks and sounds a lot like our English word "vindicate"—to clear of accusation, to absolve, to justify. Isn't that what God did for us when we became Christians? God adopting us means he vindicated us. He cleared us of any condemnation we deserved or felt we deserved. He forgives our guilt and shame. He forgave us all our spiritual debts of sin. He justified us so that it was just as if we'd never sinned. He made us a full-fledged family member, not deserved, nor earned, but freely given to us. Grace.

There was another part of this adoption process. It seems like a simple thing, but it was required then as it is often required now. The adoptive father had to pay a price. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:20 that we were bought with a price. *"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect"* (1 Peter 1:18-19).

We may indeed be called to suffer to some degree in God's perfect plan, but we will never suffer to the degree this Father and Son suffered to save the world. As we share in the communion elements together, we can see what Christ did on the cross for us as a high definition picture of adoption. Without the sacrifice of a Father and his only begotten son we could never be picked out, picked up, and brought home to enjoy the privileges of being children of God who are led by the Spirit.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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