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### **Adopted Children: Romans 8:12-17**

When someone asks you the question ‘Who are you?’, what is the first thing that pops into your mind? What are the first thoughts, besides your name, that enter your brain? How do you identify yourself? I’d like to suggest to you that whatever you most value, is also probably how you define yourself or find your identity. If you most value your job, you might immediately think of your identity as what you do for a living: “I’m a salesman” or “I’m an engineer”. If you most value your family, you might immediately think of your identity as who you’re related to: “I’m so and so’s son” or “I’m so and so’s wife” or “I’m a father”. I’d like us to think this morning about the way we identify ourselves as believers in Jesus Christ. How are we identified in Scripture?

Let’s turn and read Romans 8:12-17 again:

12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 13 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. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 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.

#### **What We Are Not**

I want to focus this morning specifically on verse 15 and our adoption as sons, but first let’s try to unpack the preceding verses. Paul begins v12 by talking about what we are not, ‘we’ here being defined earlier in the chapter in verse 9 – those who have the Spirit of God dwelling in them. If that is true of us, then we are not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. Through Christ, we no longer owe a debt to the flesh or in other words we are not slaves that live according to the flesh. Our identity has been changed from people who live according to all that the flesh desires to people who live according to what the Spirit desires. And as verse 13 explains this is a wonderful thing – because living according to the flesh leads unavoidably to death. Verses 13 and 14 are parallels of the same idea. The group of people that by the Spirit puts to death the deeds of the body is exactly the same group that is led by the Spirit of God.

There are none that are led by the Spirit that do not put to death the deeds of the body, or in other words fight against their sin. Similarly the group that will live eternally is the same group that is named to be sons of God.

### **Two Possible Fathers**

The spiritual reality of how God has created this world is that we all have one of two possible fathers. Everyone in this room has a spiritual father, without exception, just as we all have earthly fathers. For any here this morning that have not been regenerated by a sovereign work of God, God is not your father. Assuming not everyone here this morning has been born again, we are not all God's children – despite how common it may be to refer to all humans as such. We are all God's creatures and image bearers, but we are not all His children. If you are not born again, you are not God's child but instead are a child of the devil. As Jesus tells the Pharisees in John 8: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires". This indictment was not just true of the Pharisees. It is true of anyone who does not call on Jesus to be saved. This last part of Jesus' statement underlines why this is so important, and tells us one reason why who our father is is so important. Whoever our Father is will determine what our desires are. Our will will always be what our father desires – the question then becomes who is our Father? If your Father is God, you will want what He desires, and if your father is Satan then likewise you will want what he desires. Our spiritual identity is defined by who our Father is.

### **God's Fatherhood**

Obviously, we all have earthly fathers. Some of you probably think of your fathers as good fathers, and others may not. Ultimately since we're human all earthly fathers are inherently flawed. And the reality is we're much more than flawed, we're depraved sinners and so are rarely acting in a way that is consistent with being a good father. I can say this because of the example we have of what a good father should be – speaking of course of God's Fatherhood.

God has not left the concept of his fatherhood a mystery for us – He has clearly demonstrated what it means for Him to be Father by His Word telling us of the Trinitarian relationship with His Son. And that is another amazing thing about our adoption – our sonship is modeled after and meant to develop into the same relationship that exists between God the Father and Jesus Christ! Throughout Jesus' ministry and specifically in his prayers we see how Jesus relates to His Father. First, we see in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' confidence in His Father to give good things to His children. Matthew 7:9-11, "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?". Jesus knows that His Father provides

everything that His children need. Jesus also knows of the Father's affection for Him, when he says in John 5:20 "The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing". Jesus also shows honor to His Father, deferring to His authority. He also knows that His Father is with him. John 8:29 "And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him".

Of course we also have the negative example of Satan's spiritual fatherhood to compare with as well. Satan wants nothing but the worst for his children. Satan desires their destruction and misery and will do whatever he can in his power to achieve that. He does not instruct and care for – instead he misleads and tortures his children, telling them that the emptiness of sin will satisfy their hunger.

### **The Nature of Adoption**

To fully understand the nature of the Spirit of adoption mentioned in v15, let me mention a few characteristics of adoption.

The concept of adoption seems to have originated in Roman times, when it was common for someone who did not have an heir or someone to carry on the family name to adopt a male as his son. This was usually not done at infancy as is most common today, but instead usually a grown adult.

The first characteristic we see of adoption is that it is a free choice of the parent. If you decide to adopt a child, it is a conscious and intentional decision that you the parent make. No one else can make the decision for you. There is nothing coercing the adoption or forcing it to happen. And the child certainly does not bring about the adoption. Think about a child in an orphanage. The child has no influence on whether or not the adoption takes place, or on who adopts them. Until they are adopted, they are a completely passive participant; they will likely react or respond once the adoption has taken place but not before. This is a wonderful picture of God's sovereign work in regenerating and adopting us. Our Father does not simply create a possibility or enable a way for us to choose to be adopted by him – that does not fit with the metaphor of adoption and it certainly is not what scripture says. God, according to his perfect and holy plan has chosen those whom he will adopt. As Ephesians 1 tells us, God has "chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will". God chose us before the foundation of the world based on one thing – the purpose of his will. He did not look through the corridors of time to see who in the metaphorical spiritual orphanage would love Him or obey Him. He purposed the blood of Jesus, even before the foundation of the world, to redeem a select group of orphans that he would make His children.

The next characteristic of adoption I want us to think about is how the adopted children are assimilated into the family. This assimilation into the family is one reason I love the doctrine of adoption – it shows us an additional aspect of God’s extraordinary love. Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross demonstrated God’s love – that he would look on Christ’s sacrifice and declare us, those adopted as sons and daughters, justified or not guilty. This is irrespective of anything we’ve done. But God’s abundant grace and mercy to us did not stop there. That is not all that Christ’s sacrificial death achieved. By God’s perfect design He also made it so that we are not left as simply forgiven – but that we are brought into the family of God. We are loved and desired to be part of the heavenly family. God desires that we would enjoy family fellowship with Him, that we would not be left as distant worshippers of Him but that we would be brought into close communion. That is why our passage tells us that by the Spirit of adoption that he has given, we cry “Abba, Father!”. ‘Abba’ is an Aramaic word that expresses a closeness and a confident claim to our father. Because we are assured of being His children, assured that Christ has secured our place in the family, we can also confidently cry out to our Heavenly Father and know that he hears us and loves us.

When children are adopted, they do not receive some second-class status in the family. Instead they are granted every right and privilege that natural born children are given. This is an amazing truth – it means that if we are adopted by our Heavenly Father then we have every right and privilege that his natural born Son, Jesus has. The same deep Trinitarian love with which the Father loves the Son, He also loves us. Jesus tells us this in His high priestly prayer in John 17: “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them”. The same love that exists between the Father and the Son also exists between the Father and us - his adopted children.

If you’re like me, then this is hard to fathom. The God of the Universe loves me with the same love that he has for Jesus Christ. More than anything else, this shows me God’s abundant grace. His love is NOT performance based. If it were there is no way I would ever come remotely close to God loving me the same as He loves his perfectly obedient Son. Jesus is perfectly submissive to his Father, always bearing the family name with honor. Jesus is the always obedient Son, we are the unruly, troublemaking children. Our Father tells us one thing, we do the opposite. Our Father desires one thing, we desire the opposite. But that disobedience does not deter God’s adoptive plan – instead it gives it purpose, to rescue lost, dying sinners. After God’s spirit regenerates us, and changes our desires, we still carry the flesh, this old man, with us. We still are disobedient, unruly children. But God’s faithfulness to His children does not falter – the blood of Christ which he purposed to redeem us covers these sins as well.

Part of being assimilated into the family also means that we come to look like the family. When earthly children are adopted, they do not change their looks to resemble their new parents. But they do mirror their new parent's behaviors and mannerisms and speech patterns. Despite not being natural born children, not having many genetic traits passed on from their parents, they do watch and spend so much time with their parents that they start to act like them. This is another part of God's adoptive purpose for us, that we would start to act like we belong in the family – that we would spend so much time fellowshiping with our Father, and watching Him, watching His firstborn Son, that we would also evidence the family characteristics.

When we are regenerated by His spirit, our desires are changed – that's what it means to be regenerated. When our desires change, our behavior changes as well. We know this as sanctification, the progressive process of becoming more like our elder brother Christ that will not be complete until we die. God promises us that He who began a good work in us, will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ, that last day. He will be faithful to His children – he will not abandon us as hopeless or a lost cause, but He will complete this change in us. This is of course also not a painless process. God uses whatever means necessary to conform us to the family image. Hebrews 12:7-11 tells us that

“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there who his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”.

Again, God is shown to be the model father – he will patiently and gently come beside us and discipline us, giving us exactly what we need, when we need it.

As verse 17 in our passage says, we are children of God **provided** that we suffer with him. We are God's children if and only if we suffer with him, not as a requisite for salvation but as a mark of being a member of the family. Verse 17 is one of the warnings that encourage us to persevere. By adding this conditional clause, Paul is not calling into question God's faithfulness as a Father or our security as children. He is telling us that all of God's children will suffer and that we must persevere in suffering. The Bible uses these warnings, not to cause us to doubt our security but to spur us on to persevere.

There are other marks of being in the family as well. The world will react to you in a certain way, just because you are in the family of God. As Jesus tells his disciples in John 15, “If the

world hates you, know that It has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you". Just because we are in the family, the world will hate us and we will suffer persecutions. The world hates God, or as John 3 puts it: "the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." Natural man hates God because his deeds are exposed by the light of God's truth. Whenever we are adopted and that light is now present in each of us, the world also hates us because the light in us exposes their sin as well. When a child is adopted into a family, they get all of the associations of the family: family friends as well as family enemies. That is why as we grow in sanctification, we also grow in our alignment with what God loves and what God hates. That should be our goal as children: to love what our Father loves, and to hate what our Father hates. And this is exactly what His spirit of adoption brings about in us, His Spirit causes us to hate sin and to put to death the deeds of the body. The spirit of adoption changes our desires to hate sin and to fight against it in our lives – to put it to death!

One other characteristic of adoption is that when a child is adopted they are given a new name. Sometimes an adopted child in our day will keep their first name, but they almost always will have a new last or family name. So it is with God's adoption. In Revelation 2, God promises that he will give a new name to anyone who conquers or perseveres in faith. Surely he writes his name on our hearts by giving us His spirit, just as in the description of the new covenant He promises to write His law on our hearts. The spirit of adoption that He gives us also acts as a sort of family seal that marks us as His. Ephesians 1:13-14 says "In him 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, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory". The spirit is a family seal or marker, just as a new name would be, that marks us as God's adopted people.

We've already talked about the fact that adoptive children are not second-class children in the way we are treated. The amazing thing is that this applies also to our inheritance. Verse 17 says that we are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. Once again, there is no difference in adoption between the natural Son and the adopted children – we are fellow heirs or co-heirs as some translations put it. So at this point we have to ask, what is our inheritance? What is the inheritance that we as adopted children have a full share in? In John 14 Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for us. BUT the place is not the real inheritance – Jesus continues: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also". The real inheritance is not the place that is prepared but the

person who will be there –the family gathering that will be in heaven, the fact that we get to be with our Father and elder Brother for eternity.

The last characteristic of adoption that I'd like us to think about this morning is its permanence. When a child is adopted there is no time limit or duration that the adoption is intended to last. The adoption is meant to be a permanent one. A parent says to their adopted child: "You are now my child", and this is not a statement that he will ever take back or change his mind about. If that's true of us, it's so much more true of our heavenly Father. His adoption of us as children was done according to His sovereign, electing will and there is nothing that can ever change that. Scripture's metaphor of adoption should give us great assurance and confidence. Again, the term 'spirit of adoption' tells us another of the Holy Spirit's roles – to confirm to us that we are His children. How does the Spirit do this? Verse 16 says that the "Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God". The Spirit within us confirms to our hearts that we are His; the Spirit enables us to call "Abba Father!". I know this is often not as clear as we'd like if we're struggling with assurance – do I have the Spirit's confirmation or am I deceiving myself? Tom Schreiner in his commentary on Romans observes: "Ultimately the text describes a religious experience that is ineffable [or not able to be expressed in words], for the witness of the Holy Spirit with the human spirit that one is a child of God is mystical in the best sense of the word. Some veer away from this idea because of its subjectivity, but the abuse of the subjective in some circles cannot exclude the 'mystical' and emotional dimensions of Christian experience." So while in human experience this witness of the Spirit may be difficult to understand or discern, that is precisely one of its chief characteristics – that it is spiritually discerned and other-worldly. One specific way to see this more directly is to see that the spirit of adoption in verse 15 is the same spirit in verse 13 that enables us to put to death the deeds of the body, or in other words, the same spirit that enables us to resist and fight against sin. So one way that the Spirit testifies with our spirit is by confirming in us a strong desire to be free from sin, to mortify it in our fleshly bodies. If you're fighting against sin this morning, if you are earnestly desiring to be free from sin because it is offensive to God that is strong confirmation that you have the Spirit of adoption within you and that you are God's adopted child. Wherever you are in your walk this morning, what a joy it is to know that your Father in heaven will not abandon you. There is no rescinding of spiritual adoption, when you are declared to be God's child that is what you shall remain to be for all eternity. This family security is a blessed thing, and something again that may be hard for us to fathom, as we see broken families and marriages all around us. As J.I. Packer says in *Knowing God*, "things are not like that in God's family. There you have absolute stability and security; the parent is entirely wise and good, and the child's position is permanently assured. The very concept of adoption is itself a proof and guarantee of the preservation of the saints, for only bad fathers throw their children out of the family, even under provocation; and God is not a bad father, but a good one." He goes on to say "when one sees depression, randomness, and immaturity in Christians one cannot but

wonder whether they have learned the health-giving habit of dwelling on the abiding security of true children of God”.

### **Application**

We began this morning speaking of our identity. Our fundamental identity, the one that is more real and lasting than any others, is that we are adopted children of God. How does this knowledge practically affect our day to day lives? I think the answer should be in every way. The use of the term adoption is only used three times in the New Testament, but the idea of God as our Father permeates God’s word. And so the idea of us as God’s children should affect every area of our spiritual lives as well. Let me point out three specific examples.

The first example I want to mention is that of the church. The fact that we are God’s household and God’s sons and daughters means many things for the way our churches should operate. We are brothers and sisters equal in value and worth in God’s eyes - all accepted because of the blood of Christ. None of us are more deserving children that we may create divisions or play favorites. A perfect example of that is the church at Galatia. Paul wrote the book of Galatians to the church there imploring them not to make circumcision a necessity to being saved or to joining the church. Now to be clear, I think the Judaizers’ primary error was that they misunderstood God’s free grace in justification. But I think they also misunderstood the nature of their adoption. The fact that the Jewish believers were already circumcised because of their cultural traditions, that did not make them any more of a natural child than the Greek Gentiles who were not circumcised. They are no more favored by God than the rest of His adopted family. It has been said that the ground is level at the foot of the cross, and similarly we are all adopted children, equal as brothers in Christ. I think this gives us a powerful picture of what the unity of the body of Christ should look like. I pray that our church would be a visible witness of this unity of believers, that we would welcome and rejoice with every brother and sister who walks through these doors, no matter their background, cultural heritage, social position, economic standing, even what we judge to be theological correctness. I’m not saying seeking to have Biblically aligned theology is not very important for our church, but the most important distinction that we make should be the one that God makes – are we in the same family or not? Paul says in Galatians 4:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”.

The second example of how our adoption should affect our daily lives is the question of our boldness before God. Because we know that we are purposefully adopted as God’s children, we should have great confidence to bring our requests before Him and to come to Him. As we celebrate Christmas and remember the advent of our elder brother and his taking on flesh in order to represent every adopted child, let us also remember that because He did this, we can take great hope in Hebrews 4:16 “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,

that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need". Our Father is a tender, loving, merciful and gracious Father who loves to have his children come to him, to cast all on Him and trust Him for all that we need.

And finally the last example is a similar idea – and is explicitly mentioned by Paul in our text this morning. In verse 15, he tells us that we did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. The best way to understand this is to contrast how a son would respond to his father versus how a slave would respond to a master. A slave responds to his master out of fear – what the master might do if the slave does not carry out the master's wishes. Instead a father wants his son to obey and follow him, but he has a different method. The father wants the son to obey but not primarily out of fear – but out of love for the father. I say primary here because the father will use every method at his disposal to train his son for obedience, including discipline. I know with my son, I would love for him to want to obey me in order to please me at all times, but when he doesn't I will discipline him because that is what I know I must do to require obedience. Similarly, our obedience to God's will, our seeking to do as He's commanded in His word, should be not out of a sense of slavery – that this is something I dread but I am forced to do it. This is especially obvious if we consider God's commands to "Delight yourself in Him" – we can not come close to doing this when we're motivated by fear or drudgery. Instead we should seek to do His will because we love and honor our Father, we seek to please Him because we trust Him and believe that He knows what is best for his children. And so I'll exhort you this morning, delight yourself in your heavenly Father – the perfect Holy Father who has rescued you from an evil, abusive father and has seated you in the heavenly places with your brother Jesus Christ.