

Adopted By God - Part #3

“The Power of Adoption (against religion that makes God a boss-like Father)”

Text: Galatians 4:1-11

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on January 27, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Dr. Russell Moore tells of adopting two Russian boys: ***“When Maria and I first walked into the orphanage, where we were led to the boys the Russian courts had picked out for us to adopt, we almost vomited, in reaction to the stench and the squalor of the place. The boys were in cribs in the dark, lying in their own waste.***
 - ***Leaving them at the end of each day was painful, but leaving them the final day, before going home to wait for the paperwork to go through, was the hardest thing either of us had ever done. Walking out of the room to prepare for the plane ride home, Maria and I could hear Maxim calling out for us, and falling down in his crib, convulsing in tears. . .***
- ***When Maria and I at long last received the call that the legal process was over, and we returned to Russia to pick up our new sons, we found that their transition from orphanage to family was more difficult than we had supposed...***
 - ***We nodded our thanks to the orphanage personnel and walked out into the sunlight, to the terror of the two boys. They’d never seen the sun, and they’d never felt the wind. They had never heard the sound of a car door slamming or had the sensation of being carried along at 100 miles an hour down a Russian road. I noticed that they were shaking, and reaching back to the orphanage in the distance.***
 - ***I whispered to Sergei, now Timothy, ‘That place is a pit! If only you knew what’s waiting for you: a home with a Mommy and a Daddy who love you, grandparents, and great-grandparents and cousins and playmates . . . and McDonald’s Happy Meals!’ But all they knew was the orphanage. It was squalid, but they had no other reference point, and it was home.***
- ***We knew the boys had acclimated to our home, that they trusted us, when they stopped hiding food in their high-chairs. They knew there would be another meal coming, and they wouldn’t have to fight for the scraps. This was the new normal.***
 - ***They are now thoroughly Americanized, perhaps too much so, able to recognize the sound of a microwave ding from forty yards away. I still remember, though, those little hands reaching for the orphanage.***¹
- Adoption is at the very heart of Christianity. The good news of the Bible is that God became a man. The Son of God entered into the stench and squalor of our sinful world in order to liberate us from slavery to sin so *that* God might adopt us.
 - Oh what a tremendous privilege! Adoption declares that every Christian enjoys complete favour and acceptance as a son or daughter of God.
- But there is a problem. We are just like the two Russian boys. Even though they were adopted into a loving family, they often fell back into their old orphan mentality.
 - They were suspicious of their parent’s love. They did not trust them to even provide food. They were anxious, fearful, and insecure.

¹ Russell D. Moore, “The Brotherhood of Sons: What Some Rude Questions About Adoption Taught Me About the Gospel of Christ,” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 20, no. 4 (2007), <http://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=20-04-026-f>.

- It took time to break this old mentality and enter into the freedom that was already theirs as sons.
- In the same way, when God adopts us we have a new life. We are sons and daughters. We are loved and accepted. But we can easily fall back into an old mentality, which I will call “a performance-based relationship with God.”
 - By this I mean we fall into a mentality that thinks God’s favour toward us is conditional on how well we are doing at living the Christian life.
 - But this is to relate to God like he is our boss. A boss gives you list of things to do and evaluates you on the basis of your performance. If you perform well, your boss is pleased and likes you. But if you don’t perform well, your boss will be displeased and may even fire you.
- As Christians we may believe God is our Father but we often fall back into relating to him as a boss-like Father whose favour must be earned and maintained through our performance.
 - But this only leads to disaster for we are all painfully aware of how much we fail to obey God. This makes us insecure. We aren’t sure what God really thinks of us but we know it can’t be too good. And so like a boss whom we have fallen out of favour with, we keep our distance from God.
 - But to live in a performance-based relationship with God when he has adopted you is like reaching back to the orphanage. Paul says, “That place is a pit!”
- This morning I want to show you how adoption can free you from relating to God on the basis of your own performance.
 - To experience this freedom, Paul calls us to do three things. First, *recognize what you do*. Second, *recall what you were*. And third, *remember who you are*.

RECOGNIZE WHAT YOU DO

- First then, **(SHOW SLIDE 2) recognize what you do.**
 - I want to show you that, like the two Russian boys, we keep acting in ways that reveal how we have not really grasped our new life as those who have been adopted by God. **(SHOW SLIDE 3) Recognize that, even as a Christian, you often relate to God like a boss whose favour has to be earned rather than a Father whose favour is freely given.**
 - Let me show you this in the lives of the Galatian Christians and then in our lives.
- As Paul writes this letter to the Galatians, we can see that he is absolutely furious.
 - Some religious teachers had come into the Galatian churches. They were saying, **“Yes, you must believe in Jesus in order to be accepted by God. But if you want God to fully love you and accept you then you must also be circumcised and obey the Old Testament law.”**
 - These religious teachers are saying that God’s love and acceptance are based, at least in part, on our performance. But Paul fires back at them! If God’s acceptance of us depends even a bit on our performance then we are doomed because God’s law says you must obey it perfectly. In sharp contrast, the gospel, or good news, says that because of what Jesus has done, God will freely receive anyone who comes to him through Christ. What a difference!
 - Religion says, **“You must perform in order to be accepted by God.”** But the gospel says, **“Through faith in Jesus you are already accepted by God.”** Paul is furious because these religious teachers are denying the gospel and placing an impossible requirement on people.

- Paul is also shocked and deeply grieved because the Galatian Christians are actually listening to these teachers. Look at verses 9-11.
 - **READ 9-11 - *But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.***
 - They were listening to these religious teachers who said they had to follow all the special days and feasts in the Old Testament in order for God to truly accept them. Paul can't believe it. In 3:1 he says, "**O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?**"
- This whole situation teaches us something valuable. We see in the Galatians that we can be true Christians, and yet fall into a performance-based mentality that thinks God's favour is conditional on what we do.
 - We may not believe that we have to be circumcised and obey the Old Testament law but we must certainly fall into the idea that we must be good in order gain and maintain God's favour, which is still a performance-based relationship with God.
- Let me show you how we do this. Think about two different days in your week. Day #1 is Monday. It's not a good day. You wake up late and it's raining. You skip your Bible reading and forget to pray. On the way to work you yell at another driver who cuts you off. At lunch your colleague starts talking about spiritual things but you avoid talking about Jesus because you don't want to feel awkward. At home you get in a huge argument with your spouse.
 - As you crawl into bed you timidly decide to pray. Your prayer goes something like this: "**Dear God, I really don't feel like I can talk to you right now because I have made such a mess of this day. Please forgive my sins. Amen.**"
- Day #2 is Tuesday. It's a good day. You wake up early and it's sunny. You read the whole book of Philippians. You get cut off in traffic again but just turn the other cheek. At lunch you courageously talk with your colleague about Jesus. When you get home, your spouse kisses you and you enjoy a great dinner with some friends.
 - That night you decide to kneel beside your bed in prayer. Your prayer goes something like this: "**Eternal and Almighty God, the one who was, and is, and is to come! I thank Thee oh God for the blessings of this day.**" You keep praying like that for fifteen minutes.
 - Now let me ask you a question: on which day did you get your prayer wrong? Answer: You were wrong on *both* days. Why? Because you think God's love for you, and his acceptance of you, is based on how well you performed during the day rather than on what Jesus did for you on the cross.² If you did well then you feel you can approach God with confidence. If you did poorly then you feel that you can't really talk to him at all. That's a performance-based relationship.
- You can see this performance-based mentality most clearly when you have sinned. We are all like the younger brother in Jesus' story about the prodigal sons. He rejected his father, took his inheritance, and partied. When his money ran out he was forced to eat with the pigs. One day he came to his senses and said, "**I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'**"

² Illustration adapted from Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 13-19.

- Notice that he simply cannot believe that his father will still love him and accept him after what he has done. He proposes that he become an employee instead of son. Perhaps he thinks he may eventually earn his way back into some level of favour.
 - Isn't that what we do as well? When we see how much we sin, we simply cannot believe that God will still love us. And so we think we need to try harder and do better to get back in his good books. God becomes He-whose-favour-must-be-earned rather than He-whose-favour-is-freely-given-in-Christ.³
- Many of us can relate to an author named Mark Stibbe who writes:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 4) “My image of God for the first few years of my Christian life was that he was a stern judge, not a loving father. I was taught to fear God, but not to love him. The net result of this was that I started to live a life of legalism rather than a life of love. However hard I tried, I couldn't live up to God's standards. I functioned as a slave rather than as a son. The main reason was because of a deficient image of God. . . . Believers who have no doctrine or experience of adoption will basically relate to God as Master but not as Father. They will be in a Master-servant rather than Father-son relationship with God. They will know that they are justified by their faith in the unmerited love of God at Calvary, but until they know their adoption they will always see God as a Master who must be obeyed rather than a Father whom one would never want to grieve. In other words, they will live as slaves rather than sons.”⁴**
 - Can you see this performance-based mentality in your life? The first step to freedom is simply to recognize what you do. Recognize that, even as a Christian, you often relate to God like a boss whose favour is conditional on your performance.

RECALL WHAT YOU WERE

- Once you see this, the second step toward freedom is to **(SHOW SLIDE 5) recall what you were.**
 - The two Russian boys needed to understand that their old life was gone. So also, the next step toward freedom is for us to recall what we were before God adopted us.
- So, what were we before God adopted us? You might think we were orphans. In a sense this is true for we were fatherless.
 - But the Bible says our condition was far worse than that. **(SHOW SLIDE 6) Before God adopted us, we were slaves (not merely orphans).**
- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** Let's look again at the chart I showed you the last couple of weeks. Every time the apostle Paul talks about adoption he uses the term to describe a period of time within the larger timeline of the Bible.

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the great preachers of the 20th century, often used a diagnostic question to determine a person's spiritual condition. He would ask, "Can you say that you are a Christian?" People would often hesitate and then say, "I don't know if I am good enough." Lloyd-Jones writes, "At once I know that . . . they are still thinking in terms of themselves; their idea still is that they have to make themselves good enough to be a Christian, good enough to be accepted with Christ. They have to do it! 'I am not good enough.' It sounds very modest, but it is the lie of the devil, it is a denial of the faith. . . . You will never be good enough; nobody has ever been good enough. The essence of the Christian salvation is to say that He is good enough and that I am in Him!" D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 34.

⁴ Mark Stibbe, *From Orphans to Heirs: Celebrating Our Spiritual Adoption* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2005), 17, 58.

- Here in Galatians 4 Paul is speaking about three periods of time – the time before Jesus came when we were in slavery, the fullness of time when Jesus came, and the way everything changed in the period of time after Jesus came.
 - This is so important to see because Paul is going to show us that to rely on our performance as the means to gain or maintain God’s favour is like going back to the period of time before Jesus came. It is a return to the era of slavery.
 - You’re not just reaching back to the orphanage. You’re reaching back to the chains of slavery.
- So let’s listen to Paul explain this period of time before Christ came. He explains it by way of an illustration. Look at verses 1-3.
 - **READ 1-3 – I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.**
- So imagine a small boy from the first century living in a family of great wealth. He is legally the heir of the entire estate. However, despite being the heir, the boy possesses no legal rights as a child. He must wait for a time, set by his father, when he will become an adult and therefore become the lord of the estate.
 - Until that time comes, this boy is placed under the supervision of guardians and trustees. They controlled every part of his life. They disciplined him, told him when to wake up, and when to go to bed.
 - Paul wants two things to be clear here: first, even though this boy is the heir, he is no better than a slave. Second, this state of bondage is temporary. It only lasts until the time comes when his father declares him to a man, and thus the lord of the estate.
- All of this is meant to illustrate the state of humanity in the period of time before Christ came. First, it is a description of Israel living under the law. **(SHOW SLIDE 8) In the era before Christ came, God’s underage son, Israel, was in a slave-like state.**
 - Romans 9:4 tells us that, God adopted Israel as his son. But Israel was like an underage son. God gave the law as a guardian to teach his young heir a very important lesson. The law taught Israel that they could never achieve acceptance with God on the basis of their own performance because they could not keep the law. The law revealed their sin. And so this young heir was in a slave-like state – the law commanded obedience but, because of sin, Israel was unable perform what was required.
 - This is so important for us to understand because Paul is saying, “**The entire era before Christ came was meant to prove that no one can earn God’s favour. So if you try to earn God’s favour or maintain his favour through your performance you are going back to that old era of slavery.**”
- Things were bad for Israel in the period of time before Christ came but Israel was still God’s son through adoption. For the rest of humanity, things were even worse. **(SHOW SLIDE 9) In the era before Christ came, the rest of humanity was in actual slavery.**
 - Look at verse 8. **READ 8 - Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.** In verse 9 he calls these non-gods “**the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world.**” That is the same phrase from verse 3. **READ 3 - In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.**

- This term “elementary principles of the world” probably refers to all the basic thought systems of the world – of religions and secular thinking that enslave people to sin.
- All of this teaching is so important because **(SHOW SLIDE 10) To relate to God on the basis of human performance is like going back to the time of slavery.**
 - Paul says, **“Why would you want to do that? That place is a pit!”**

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

- Now we come to the big final point. To break out of a performance-based relationship with God you must, in the third place, **(SHOW SLIDE 11) remember who you are.**
- Although verse 3 ends by saying we were enslaved, verse 4 begins with one of the best words in the entire Bible: “But.” Our situation was hopeless, **“but”** God acted on our behalf. We were enslaved, **“but”** God did something for us. What did God do? Look at verse 4: **“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son.”**
 - The father in Paul’s illustration set a time when his underage son became a man and was freed from his slavery under his guardian. So also, God the Father set a time when he would bring us from childhood slavery into the freedom of adult sonship.
 - When that time arrived, God sent His Son into the world to rescue us. Look at how uniquely qualified he was to rescue us. He is God’s **“Son.”** As God he, therefore, has the power to save us. He is **“born of a woman,”** which means he shares in our humanity and so can represent us. He was **“born under the law,”** which emphasizes that he perfectly kept God’s law.
- But now I want you to see the heart of this passage. Why did God send His Son? Notice that Paul gives a twofold answer.
 - First, Jesus came to redeem those in slavery. **“God sent forth his Son . . . to redeem those who were under the law.”** In the ancient world, “redemption” referred to the release of a slave by the payment of a price. In Galatians 3:13 Paul writes, **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”**⁵
 - Oh what love! God sent his Son for us. The Son took the punishment of our curse upon himself. The price was paid and so slaves are set free.
- But what I really want you to see in this passage is that God did not just send his Son to redeem us from slavery. That is glorious! But the sentence does not end there. Look at verse 5 again.
 - **“But . . . God sent forth his Son . . . to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”** Look at those two words, **“so that.”** Underline them. Highlight them.
 - God’s purpose in sending Jesus was not just to free us from slavery. He freed us so *that* he might adopt us.
- If God had simply redeemed us we would rejoice and sing forever of his love toward us. But redemption, as glorious as it is, is not the end goal. Redemption clears the way so that God can adopt us and give us all the privileges that come with it.
 - In redemption God declares, **“You are no longer a slave of sin”** so that God can adopt us and say, **“You are my son. You are my daughter.”**

⁵ See also Gal. 1:3b-4a: “. . . the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age. . .”

- In redemption God declares, **“You are free to leave the prison of sin”** so that God can adopt us and say, **“Welcome to warmth and comfort of my home.”**
- In redemption God declares, **“My Son paid the debt you owe”** so that God can adopt us and say, **“You are now an heir and will share in the vast inheritance that I will give to my Son, Jesus.”**
 - That the King would free slaves at such a high cost to himself is a tremendous act of love. But that the King would then adopt freed slaves into his family defies comprehension.
- The key to breaking this performance-based relationship with God is to remember who you are. Paul says it so clearly in verse 7: **“So you are no longer a slave, but a son.”**
 - The time of slavery is over. You do not have to perform in order to earn God’s favour. Jesus did this for you. Through his perfect life, death, and resurrection he earned God’s favour for anyone who comes to him.
 - You have been adopted. You have a new status and identity. You are a son. You are a daughter. And so you are fully loved and accepted. Remember who you are.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** On March 26, 2013 Heather and I sat in this government office in Kunming, China. The officials placed this document in front of us. **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** The first question asks, **“Are you willing to adopt this child.”** We wrote, **“Yes.”** The next question asks if we promise to care for this child. We wrote, **“Yes.” (SHOW SLIDE 14)** We then paid them a lot of money.
 - After this, we were given this notarized document which states **(SHOW SLIDE 15) “This is to certify that Barton Priebe and Heather Priebe have reached an agreement to adopt Liao Yu. . . . the adoptive relationship takes effect March 26, 2013. Barton Priebe is now Liao Yu’s adoptive father and Heather Priebe is now Liao Yu’s adoptive mother.”**
 - On that day Joshua Liao Yu legally became our son. **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** Here is a picture of us the day after adopting Josh.
- While awaiting Josh’s immigration papers and passport we spent a week in Beijing. Every night Josh would wake up screaming in fear. One night, around 3:00am, I picked him up. He immediately started blowing me kisses and clapping his hands. He knew that these things impressed me and made me happy. But the way that he did came across very insecure like he was saying, **“Please be impressed with me. Look at what I can do for you. Please love me because I am a good boy.”**
 - I whispered in his ear something like, **“Josh, you don’t need to try and prove yourself out of a fear that I will leave you. You are my son now and I will always love you.”**
 - Many Christians struggle to truly believe God loves them. God says, **“In Christ, you are my son. In Christ, you are my daughter now. I will always love you.”** Remember who you are.
- Yet, our hearts are still like the prodigal son. When we see how much we sin, we simply cannot believe that God could fully love us. Maybe a partial love where we work our way back into his favour but not a full and complete love.
 - But the Father will not have it. In Jesus’ story we read that **“while [the son] was still a long way off the father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to him, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”**
 - The Father will not even listen to the son’s proposal. He yells for the servants saying, **“Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and**

celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”

- Behold the extravagant love and grace of the Father!
- The great Puritan John Owen said, **(SHOW SLIDE 17) “The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him is not to believe that he loves you.”**⁶
 - What more can God do to prove his love for you? When we were slaves he sent His only Son to rescue us from slavery. The era of slavery is over. That should be enough to prove his love for us. But he went further. He adopted us into his family giving us all the rights and privileges of an adult son in his household.
 - You don’t have to earn God’s favour. Through Jesus Christ you already have God’s favour. You are his son. You are his daughter. Remember who you are.

⁶ I have updated Owen’s original 17th century wording, which says, “Yea, as your great trouble is about the Father’s love, so you can no way more trouble or burden him, than by your unkindness in not believing of it.” John Owen, *Of Communion With God The Father, Son And Holy Ghost* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 3:1.3. Walter Marshal connects this sense of God’s love with Christian living: “You cannot love God if you are under the continual secret suspicion that he is really your enemy! You cannot love God if you secretly think he condemns and hates you! . . . God has made it very clear in his word how he brings his people from sin to holy living – he first makes them understand that he loves them, and that their sins are totally blotted out.” Walter Marshal, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification: Growing in Holiness by Living in Union with Christ* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005), 31, 33.