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Bridgeway Church
Christmas Eve / 2016

Turning Orphans into Heirs: Spiritual Adoption and the Purpose of Christmas Galatians 4:4-7

Do you ever find yourself comparing the gifts you receive at Christmas? If you do, it's probably a good idea not to mention this to anyone else, especially those whose gift may not have rated as highly as others in your estimation.

What about God's gifts to us? Is it possible to rate them in terms of their importance or value? On the one hand, the greatest gift God could ever give to hell-deserving sinners like you and me is himself. Nothing else can even remotely compare with the glorious gift of seeing God and knowing God and enjoying God forever. But let's put that aside for just a moment and consider all the other wonderful gifts that God has bestowed on us.

I would like to suggest that the most wonderful of all God's gifts to us, other than himself, is the right and privilege and authority to become his adopted children. Here is how the Apostle John put it:

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:1-2).

John's tone and terms virtually bristle with urgency and excitement. “Come quickly and see! Look! Listen! You can't imagine what I have to tell you!” I like that. Here's an elderly man nearing the end of life who still gets excited about the love of God.

Why? Because John knew that God's love has bestowed on us the greatest of all blessings: *sonship*. Here is the measure of God's love. Here is the test of how deeply he treasures us.

“O.K.,” you say, “but what does this have to do with Christmas, Sam?” That's a great question, and the answer is found in what the Apostle Paul says about spiritual adoption. It's found in Galatians 4. There we read this:

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)

In this text we see as explicit a declaration of the purpose of Christmas as can be found anywhere in the Bible. God sent forth his Son “to redeem” those who were under the law. In other words, because of our violation of God's law we are held in spiritual slavery to sin and its consequences. The blood of Jesus Christ shed on Calvary was the ransom price that God paid to “redeem” or purchase us out from the tyranny and condemnation of sin.

But this redemption has a higher and more ultimate goal than simply to deliver us from slavery to sin. God redeemed us **“so that we might receive adoption as sons”!**

As you prepare to celebrate Christmas with the giving and receiving of material and earthly gifts, don't let this day pass without devoting your heart and mind to a meditation on the greatest gift of all: through faith in Jesus Christ God has made you a son and a daughter and therefore an heir of all things!

If that simple declaration in Galatians 4 doesn't resonate deeply with you tonight, it may be because you have lost sight of the fact you are not naturally a child of God. It is true that God is the Father of all men and women insofar as he is their Creator. But many such "children" of God will spend an eternity in hell. One does not become a spiritual child of God by being born, but by being born-again. Let me explain.

All of us are born into this world as *spiritual orphans*. Apart from Jesus Christ we have no family, no father, no future except one in which we are eternally separated from God.

Here is where God's incalculable love makes its appearance. Listen again to the words of the Apostle John:

"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:10-13).

John is describing the glorious truth of our adoption as sons and daughters into the family of God. Paul speaks of this again in Romans 8.

"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!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:15-16).

These texts make it clear that there is no saving relationship to God as Father without a living faith in Jesus Christ. Being a child of God, therefore, is not a universal status upon which everyone enters by natural birth. It is rather a supernatural gift one receives by believing in Jesus. Adoption is wholly and utterly an act of God's spontaneous and uncoerced love.

J. I. Packer reminds us that in the ancient world "adoption was a practice ordinarily confined to the childless well-to-do. Its subjects . . . were not normally infants, as today, but young adults who had shown themselves fit and able to carry on a family name in a worthy way. In this case, however, God adopts us out of free love, not because our character and record show us worthy to bear His name, but despite the fact that they show the very opposite. We are not fit for a place in God's family; the idea of His loving and exalting us sinners as He loves and has exalted the Lord Jesus sounds ludicrous and wild – yet that, and nothing less than that, is what our adoption means" (*Knowing God*, 195).

Even today when a childless couple visits the orphanage with a view to adopting, they invariably base their choice on physical beauty and intellectual skills. Rarely does one hear of a child with Down syndrome being adopted. Rarely does the orphan with spina bifida go home with new parents. Prospective parents want to know about a child's natural father and mother. Was this child the product of rape? What is his ethnic origin? Did she come from "good stock"? What is his IQ?

God's choice of us is utterly and eternally different. He didn't make us his children because we were prettier than others. Divine adoption isn't concerned with physical health or financial wealth or potential or one's past history. God loves the unlovely and unappealing. God loves because God loves. That is why you are his child. Because he loves you.

John goes to great lengths to insist that entrance into God's family is on a different plane from entrance into one's earthly family. One does not become a child of God by the same process one becomes a child of a physical parent. In other words, spiritual life is not genetically transmitted!

My earthly father was a Christian. So, too, is my mother. But that isn't why *I* am a Christian. Your father and mother may not be Christians. But that has no ultimate impact on whether or not you are.

The DNA of one's parents has nothing to do with becoming a child of God. Your heritage, ancestry, family tree, no matter how glorious and impressive, have nothing to do with your entrance into the kingdom of God. The fact that you have descended from noble blood or are the product of peasants is irrelevant.

Earlier I suggested that being adopted into God's family is perhaps the most glorious blessing a good and loving God could possibly bestow. I still believe it. I rejoice in the fact that I've been justified and forgiven and granted eternal life. But to know and experience God as my Father, Abba, Daddy, is greater still.

When you are justified by faith in Christ, you stand before God as Judge and hear him declare: "Not guilty! Righteous through faith in Jesus!" Praise God! But in adoption God the Judge steps down from behind his legal bench, removes his stately robes, stoops down and takes you into his arms of love and says softly: "My son, my daughter, my child!" I relish the experience of every divine blessing. I thank God daily that I am a member of the body of Christ and a citizen of the kingdom. But nothing can quite compare with knowing that when I was homeless, helpless, and hopeless, God rescued me from the gutter of sin and made me his child. Nothing can compete with the thrill of being adopted as a full and coequal heir with Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:17).

Says Packer, "God receives us as sons, and loves us with the same steadfast affection with which He eternally loves His beloved only-begotten. There are no distinctions of affection in the divine family. We are all loved just as fully as Jesus is loved . . . This, and nothing less than this, is what adoption means. No wonder that John cries, 'Behold, what manner of love . . .!' When once you understand adoption, your heart will cry the same" (196).

It isn't make-believe. It is more real than you can ever imagine. To every soul that doubts, to every heart that wonders if it's only a name, a label, with no substance, John reassuringly declares "and so we *are!*" (1 John 3:1; emphasis mine). It's fact. It's truth. It's reality.

Oh, yes, there's one more thing. Neither John nor Paul nor any other biblical author says that we are God's "foster" children. We are his *adopted* children. The former relationship is at best a temporary one. The latter is eternal.

Let me briefly share with you the story of a friend of mine in Ardmore. Actually, I'll let her tell the story herself. She wrote it down for me several years ago.

"Being adopted," explains Janie, "gives me an unusual ability to understand my adoption into God's arms. My [adoptive] parents had no idea whether I would be a boy or girl. They wanted me regardless of my gender. God also loves us irrespective of gender. Knowing that they loved me before I was born deepens my gratitude that God knew me and chose me before the foundation of the world!"

"My adoptive parents chose to ignore my impoverished past. The fact that my natural mother was on welfare didn't diminish their love for me. Likewise, God knows our wicked past, our spiritual impoverishment, down to the smallest disgusting detail. Yet he loves us anyway! To have been twice adopted and loved in this way goes beyond any words in my vocabulary."

Janie brought me a copy of the Final Adoptive Decree and pointed out a fascinating and instructive paragraph. It states that “for all intents and purposes whatsoever, the said child is and is hereby declared to be in the same relationship to the Petitioners [the adoptive parents] as if born to them by natural birth, and remaining in such relationship as if the child were their own.”

What this means, among other things, is that Janie is legally as much a child of these parents as any other born to them by natural means. She is a co-heir with all others in that family. We, too, are co-heirs with Christ our brother. The good news is, whereas this earthly adoptive decree is stamped and notarized by the state, our “Spiritual Adoptive Decree” is sealed with the blood of Christ and signed by the God who cannot lie!

Whereas sometimes the love of earthly parents falters and even fails, the love of our Heavenly Father is immutable. No one in heaven or on earth can challenge the eternal legality of what God has done for us in making you and me his beloved children.

Janie also pointed out yet another statement in the decree which says that “the rights of all other persons, if any they have, to the care, control and custody of said child be and the same are hereby forever and finally terminated . . . “ If you can’t get beyond the legal language, listen to how Janie explains it.

“These words can be used to describe God’s adoption of me into his family. When I was adopted by my earthly parents, my old identity was terminated. Legally speaking, anyway, I became a new and different person. I became Mary Jane Fox. When I was adopted by my Heavenly Father I also left behind my old self and was reborn with a new identity, a clean slate, a fresh start.”

It was quite a few years ago that I rejoiced with Janie and her husband as they celebrated the birth of their first child. At one point Janie said, “She is so fragile and vulnerable! She stumbles and falls and whines and often makes such a mess of things. But that’s the way we are with God. Every day I stumble and fall and mess things up, but my Father is there to pick me up. He comforts me when I’m down. I complain and get into trouble. Yet, he gently corrects me and loves me in a way that overshadows even the best of earthly affections.”

Earthly, adoptive love, is unspeakably special. Yet such sacrifice and passion, for all its beauty, for all its wonder, pales before the brilliant light of God’s love for you and me, one-time spiritual orphans. So, again, what is the purpose of Christmas? Why did God send his Son to be born of a woman? Why did God redeem us from the slavery and condemnation of sin? It “so that we might receive adoption as sons [and daughters]. And because you are sons [and daughters], God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son [and a daughter], and if a son [or a daughter], then [you are] an heir through God.”

Merry Christmas indeed!