

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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March 8th, 2026

Sermon Title: Adoption: Heirs of God

Sermon Text: Romans 8:12-17a

Rom. 8:12 ¶ So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

Rom. 8:13 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.

Rom. 8:14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Rom. 8:15 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!”

Rom. 8:16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

Rom. 8:17a and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ...

Main Point: Christians are not slaves, but sons of God by adoption, and now members of God’s household and family.

Outline:

1. Children of the King
2. Brothers of the Brethren
3. Heirs of God

Introduction

The first book I read after becoming a Christian was a book by J.I. Packer, and it was called *Knowing God*. And in that book, Packer makes a point about the doctrine of adoption. And here's what he says: "Justification is the truly dramatic transition from the status of a condemned criminal awaiting a terrible sentence to that of an heir awaiting a fabulous inheritance." So there he makes this point that being justified means our transition from one status to another. We *used* to be criminals, rebels, and enemies.

Now? Well, now in Christ we are adopted. We aren't just "not guilty," we're family now.

I have to tell you, in the almost 30 years that I've been a Christian, I've heard a lot of presentations of the gospel. And to be honest, a lot of them begin and end with forgiveness of our sins. But it's almost like many don't know what's next. Or at least we aren't telling people what's next. It's like, we've been forgiven, but for what?

Packer's answer to this was eye-opening. And his answer was the doctrine of adoption. Here is what J.I. Packer said:

"Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification. To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater."

And this "what's next" from Paul is what I want to dwell on today.

You see, I have a big heart for the Christian who has really only heard about justification. The Christian who thinks the whole point of the Christian life is merely forgiveness alone. The Christian who thinks that the beginning and middle and end of the gospel is *only* justification, really. The person who pictures God as fulfilling his responsibility because you got in. You got your get out of jail free card. You trusted in Jesus. You think of your ticket as getting punched. But now you think of your life in Christ as *living* on that technicality ("God has to let me in now"). Many Christians have not grasped that what we have now is very rich... we need to embrace this truth that God justifies sinners through faith in Christ alone.

But there's so much more than that, too: we're family now. And God is now our Father, and He can no more deny us in Christ than he can deny himself.

And my burden here today is this:

So many Christians hear the gospel as a way to *not* go to hell. And often they build their whole understanding of the Christian life around that. “How is my quest to continue to not go to hell going today?” But then they also live the Christian life as if they’re hanging from a spider thread that’s about to break, all the time. And so instead of seeing the gospel as a glorious message that brings us to God, they hear it as a really important message that is really only about how God won’t condemn us.

That is a very anemic understanding of the gospel.

Because God made us for fellowship with him. And this means that the goal is bigger than just a “no condemnation” verdict. We should be seeing God declaring us “not guilty” as a *first* step, not the whole goal. Because we don’t just need forgiveness. What we really need is to know *God*, to behold his face, to live in his presence, and to do so from a position of perfect acceptance and security. The problem is, we may still be living in “how can I make sure I’m not condemned” land. As if we’ve never moved on from this elementary thing. But in Christ, we don’t get over the glory of justification, but we should be excited to go further. We are secure now. We’re family now. We’re his children now.

One of the ways God illustrates the nearness, the security, and the belonging that we have is through this precious and important concept of adoption, which is what our passage really brings us to. Let me show you how, today. And my hope is that by the end, you’ll realize how enfolded and how beloved and secure you really are in Christ.

1. Children of the King

First today, in Christ, we have been adopted and made children of the king.

We see this adoption all over this passage. Look at this:

In verse 12, Paul calls us brothers. We’ll talk about this in the next point, but if the Romans (or us for that matter) are Paul’s brothers it’s because we’re in the same family.

In verse 14 he says that believers are “sons of God.”

In verse 16 and 17, Paul speaks of the spirit’s witness that we are children of God.

I really want to dwell on verse 15 though, because in verse 15 he gets really explicit: “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’”

If you are trusting in Jesus Christ, you have received the Spirit of adoption. What does that mean? It means what Packer referred to earlier. Before, we were enemies, rebels, and opponents. But now through faith, we’ve not only been justified and given peace with God, but we’ve been adopted in Christ. Our church catechism says this about adoption:

“Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges, of the sons of God.” (WSC 34)

Why is he called the “spirit of adoption”? (Last week he was called the Spirit of life; this week He’s the “spirit of adoption.” But why?)

- Part of the answer is that the Spirit is the witness of God’s generosity to us.
- Another part of the answer is that the Spirit is the one who gives us new life, so that the family resemblance becomes apparent.
 - Now we have a love for God and our neighbor that wasn’t there before, and that is thanks to the Spirit, who gives life.

One really important point I want to emphasize here is that in physical, real adoption, this person really does become your son or daughter. In adoption, we are not playing house; we are really family now.

The best proof I have for this is that in Matthew’s gospel it is Joseph’s genealogy that Matthew uses to link Jesus to King David. Joseph is not Jesus’ physical father, but Jesus is called the son of David through Joseph’s genealogy. The reason Jesus can be called the Son of David and an answer to the promise of 2 Samuel 7 is that adoption makes one just as much a son as birth does. Jesus is Joseph’s adopted son. And the genealogy says, “then he’s really Joseph’s son.”

So there are two things I want to draw from this. First is a literal point about adoption. If you are adopted, you should know, you are not playing house with your family. Just as Jesus was really Joseph's son, you are really and truly a member of your household. You are not second-class family. You are just as much family as any physical children your parents may have.

I also want to mention that this view of adoption has been important in Christian history. Christians have a rich heritage of adopting children and caring for orphans. In the early church, when Roman society routinely abandoned unwanted babies on garbage heaps to die, Christians did something radical—they rescued them. The catacombs of Rome are filled with tiny graves inscribed 'adopted daughter of...' or 'adopted son of...'—evidence that Christians pulled infants from the trash and raised them as their own children. This is our heritage as Christians—we care for the fatherless because God adopted us.

The second thing I want to say is that just like adoption really makes someone your child, God really does make us his children. Packer says this: “‘Father’ is the Christian name for God. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.”

Jews do not call God Father. Sometimes in the Old Testament Israel is called God's son, but Packer is right. “Father” is the Christian name for God. In Christ, we have a unique relationship to God as our Father that is different than it is for every other human being who isn't in Christ.

If you will hear and receive what Paul is saying here, you are grasping deeper and richer things than merely being forgiven. Adoption takes us to the place where we aren't just forgiven, we're family.

2. Brothers of the Brethren

Second, in Christ we have been adopted and made brothers of the brethren.

I pointed this out earlier that Paul calls the Romans “brothers” even though they are mostly gentiles. Paul is a Jewish man but considers anyone who follows Jesus to be more family than someone with physical or genetic relations.

One of the ugliest things that I have seen masquerading as Christianity is an increasing obsession on both the political right and the political left with the subject of race. There is an ugly horseshoe effect from both ends of the political spectrum that sees physical, genetic, and racial identity as an indelible and permanent dividing line between different people groups.

On the political left, this sometimes appears as a belief that racial identity forms a permanent, unbridgeable division—that people of different races (however someone might define that) occupy such fundamentally different positions that genuine unity in Christ cannot overcome these categories, that we should have distinct racial spaces and divide off from each other and so on. Essentially, they argue for segregation and separation. Because they think that races are real (and not just a social construct), they can't fit together or live side-by-side. Nothing can overcome it. And perhaps apart from the gospel that has some element of truth. After all, without the gospel, Jews and Gentiles wouldn't be worshiping alongside each other in the Roman church.

Among many problems, this idea fundamentally denies the reconciling power of the gospel, suggesting that our racial identities are more fundamental than our shared identity as God's children. That's on the political left.

And on the horseshoe right this way of thinking shows up in movements like Kinism which encourages people toward racial realism, toward segregation, toward saying that mixed marriages are a sin, and toward saying that one's own racial group gets priority over the others. This sort of perspective isn't just political. It ends up warping one's whole theology. It changes your doctrine of man, your doctrine of sin, your doctrine of God, and yes, your doctrine of adoption.

I have recognized this as a mostly online phenomenon, but that doesn't mean it isn't capturing the imagination of some in our world today. Both of these groups often end up denying either that racial harmony is possible, or that it's something that we should want. And usually both left and right wing racism press people toward segregation and separation.

It is true that Paul still has a big heart for his physical brethren, the Jews. It's not like Paul is blind to any differences between Jews and Gentiles, of course. We'll see that in the next couple chapters. Paul is even willing to be accursed by God

rather than to see the Jews perish, after all. But his love for the Jews does not mean that he places physical ethnicity on a pedestal above the gospel, or above those who are his brothers in Christ. It's really just an expression of how great Paul's love for all people is: Paul has been rejected by the Jewish establishment, attacked by them, stoned by them, but he *still*s want to see them experience the same gospel as everyone else; that's an incredible love. But even more, if Paul can call *Gentiles* brothers, then he can call *anyone* "brother"! The gospel really is that powerful! In fact, I can think of no worldly hope to reconcile people to each other than this good news.

When we are adopted by God through faith in Christ, we are drawn near to God, but there is also a genuine relational change between us and other believers. We aren't just fellow church members, but we become family: brothers and sisters. This should affect how we treat each other, how we speak to each other, how we speak *about* each other.

You are more family with other believers than you are with people of the same skin color or ethnicity or language. You don't stop having a father or mother, but you have a closer tie to other believers than you do to your own blood.

It is believers in Christ (wherever they are from) who are our true brothers and sisters. Meanwhile, someone may be the same ethnicity as us but be complete strangers, and enemies of God.

The obsession with ethnicity and race on both the left and the right pushes people away from each other and against each other. But it involves a profound denial of the image of God. And when *Christians* participate in such things, it implies a denial of the Christian doctrine of adoption, and by extension is an abominable denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If Jews and Gentiles could worship alongside of each other in the early church, then there may not be deeper divisions possible between people groups today.

The gospel means that we aren't just sons and daughters of the king. We're brothers and sisters of everyone who calls upon the Lord Jesus as his fellow children.

In Christ, we don't just gain a father. We gain a whole family of believers throughout the world.

3. Heirs of God

Third, in Christ we have been adopted and made heirs of God.

In verse 17, Paul makes this brief statement, coming in from the previous verse where he says, the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, then he says this: "and children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ."

When he says "heirs with Christ" he is saying that when we are in Christ—when we are united to Christ—we receive all that Christ has. This includes the gift of salvation—of justification, of holiness, of righteousness. But our inheritance is far greater than that. Here is the question: what does it mean to be "heirs of God"?

Well it would be easy to read this as saying, "we are heirs of all that *belongs* to God." The problem is, that's not what Paul says. Paul is taking us straight to the greatest gift and blessing that we can possibly have in all the universe. And that greatest gift isn't money or possessions. It isn't health and wealth, regardless of what crooks and swindlers would have you believe. The greatest gift that Paul says we receive in Christ is God himself. That's what he means when he says that if we are his children then we are "heirs of God."

In the gospel, we get God.

If you found out that you inherited a great mansion, that would be pretty incredible. If you found out that you are an heir of a huge family fortune that would be wild. But here Paul says, "You inherit God Himself. You get God!"

The thing we receive in the gospel is God himself. And it's actually incredibly stunning. To have God as our God... when we are united to Christ by faith, we have God as our Father like Jesus has God as Father. And even here all Paul is doing is echoing things we see all over the Bible; especially in the Psalms. Look at this:

Psalm 16:5 - "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance."

Psalm 73:25-26 - "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth... God is the strength of my heart and my [inheritance] forever."

Psalm 142:5 - "I cried to You, O LORD: I said, 'You are my refuge and my portion in the land of the living.'"

Psalm 119:57 - "You are my portion, O LORD"

Do you see this? "God is my portion," When he says that David is saying, "God is the one I live for, the one I yearn for, the one my heart was made to have fellowship with. When I don't have God, I'm homesick. Without God himself, I have an infinitely sized hole within me, and I'll never be satisfied without him."

The Puritan Thomas Watson put it this way: "Till the soul can find rest in God as its center, it is like Noah's dove which flew to and fro and could find no rest for the sole of its foot."

Charles Spurgeon captured the heart of this when he said, "It is not the hell that I fear—it is the thought that I could ever lose my Father's smile." That's what adoption gives us—not just escape from wrath, but nearness to the Father's heart.

The Puritan John Owen wrote: "To have the Father himself for our portion and exceeding great reward; to have his personal excellencies all made over to us... this is the life of faith." This is what it means to be heirs of God—God himself becomes our treasure, our inheritance, our everything.

Even the early church father Chrysostom marveled at this, saying: "What could be more blessed than this? The Master has become our Father." Think about that—the God who created galaxies, who spoke worlds into being, who needs nothing from anyone—He becomes our Father through adoption.

This is why the Reformers insisted that adoption is actually a higher privilege than justification. As J.I. Packer said, "To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater." Justification gets us into the courtroom with a "not guilty" verdict. But adoption? Adoption takes us from the courtroom into the family room, to sit at the Father's table, to call Him "Abba."

And for Paul, all of this takes us to his initial claim: “we are not debtors to the flesh.” Now, we have seen this before, but Paul’s argument against sinning isn’t aspirational, it is based on what God has actually and already done. “Because God has made you his child, don’t cosplay as a slave.” God has made you a son, so don’t live like you’re *not* his son. Your inheritance is God himself, and is far too precious for you to eat with the pigs or roll around in the mud.

Conclusion

What Paul wants us to grasp here is that being adopted into God’s family means we have no obligation to follow Adam any longer. But even more, think of all this: it means we’re in. We’re not just *in*, we’re *enfolded*. We’re as much family as we could ever hope to be. It means we’re as near to him as we can be without becoming him (since there will always be a distinction between the creator and creature).

Why am I belaboring this adoption so much? Because there are many Christians who go through each day fearful, anxious, worried, ashamed. And part of the reason for that is, they still approach their relationship to God like they’re an outsider; like any minute they’re going to get discovered and somehow kicked to the curb like they think that deep-down they really deserve. They’re still living in the shallow end, obsessed with not being condemned. But they dwell on themselves, think about themselves, and obsess over themselves. And usually this is a negative dwelling on themselves. Really beating themselves up.

Yes, we may think we are giving God honor by having a very low view of ourselves. But the problem is, we keep carrying that *into* the Christian life, even after God has pardoned and adopted us in Christ. And so we keep talking about ourselves – and thinking of ourselves – as if we aren’t secure and at risk of being kicked out. Or we live the Christian life fearful that our actions each day will lead to some sort of situation where God loved me yesterday, and he doesn’t today.

When we do this, we dishonor the God whose Gospel is an enfolding, securing message. When we do this, we live as if his good news is *partial* good news, or just a good first step. So it becomes good news *if* we can keep it up, *if* we keep asking

God to feed us through the mail slot on the front door of the kingdom or whatever.

In 2 Timothy 2:13, Paul says this one sentence—a sentence that if you believe it, will reverse all of this. He says, “If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.” Christian, please stop settling for mere forgiveness. John Murray says that justification is a great blessing, but “*adoption* is the apex of grace and privilege.” You love justification by faith alone? Murray says, keep going. Don’t stop. He’s given you the spirit of adoption, too!

In Christ, you are as secure with the Father as Jesus himself is. God can as easily deny you as he can himself. You see, we are not dogs eating scraps from God’s table, living on technicalities. We’re family, and we sit at the table. Christian, please embrace your adoption as sons and daughters of God. Live in the riches of the gospel, not in the scraps of it. You are his family. And that means your life isn’t shaky. It’s secure.

Thomas Watson, made this point: God has made us nearer to himself than even the angels. Watson says, “The angels are the friends of Christ; believers are his family.”

All of this leads to Paul’s conclusion: you’re not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. You’re his family. His children. You’re family. This means you’re enfolded and brought in. It means you have no reason to be afraid (which we’ll explore more next week). It means you’re secure and not shaky in your standing with God. And from that place of security, we can step out, we can take risks, we can give up anything, we can be led by his spirit instead of by the flesh, because we don’t just call him God. In Christ, we call him Father.

Let’s pray.