

*because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*<sup>15</sup> *For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."*<sup>16</sup> *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*<sup>17</sup> *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. (Romans 8:14-17)*

### **What does it Mean to be Adopted?**

Is adoption a good thing or a bad thing? If you go by what you see in Disney movies or by what you hear in fairy tales and children's stories, it must be truly horrible. Those stories are full of wicked stepmothers and cruel stepfathers. Cinderella's stepmother not only tried to keep her from going to the ball, but even locked her in the attic so she couldn't try on the glass slipper. On TV, if a character grew up in foster care, that's shorthand for an unhappy childhood. But is all that fair? In our congregation, I think we know better because we have examples of adoption that are nothing like what you see on TV. While there certainly are stepparents who are "stepmonsters," I can think of many stepparents who love the children who came with their marriage and who have good and healthy relationship with those kids. There are bad situations out there, but in many cases, adoption is an act of love. And it is a picture that God uses again and again in his Word to teach us about grace, his undeserved love. Whether we were adopted or raised by our biological parents, spiritually speaking, every one of us is adopted. God did that act of love for you.

#### **I.**

**What does it mean to be adopted? It means that we are children of God.** Being adopted by God is a blessing that the Holy Spirit works. St. Paul says that **"those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."** He was talking about living a Christian life. That's what he means by being "led by the Spirit of God." We Christians resist temptation. Each of us was born with a sinful nature that wants to sin. There's a part of us that puts itself first, always. But when God puts faith in our hearts, we begin to fight against that pride. We only undertake that struggle against our own sinful nature because God has given us faith.

That's what the Bible means by adoption: God gave us faith. That does more than just make us members of a church or obligate us to provide financial support for an institution. God made us a part of his family. Paul says, **"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"** It is so easy to be a slave of fear. In my ministry, I've listened to many Christians talk about their fears. In my life, I've wrestled with many of mine own. But in Christ, we have a spirit that sets us free from fear, because we are now the children of God who loves us.

The primary fear Paul is talking about is fear of God punishing us. You could go back to that image of the tyrannical stepfather who can never be pleased. His adopted children tremble in his presence. They fear him and hate him, but they would never say it out loud. In fact, they may work extra hard to assure that tyrant that they love him, because they don't want to be punished. If that were the kind of stepfather we got when God adopted us, that would be terrible. Imagine if our God took pleasure in his wrath. Imagine if God had no mercy for us sinners and simply demanded perfection and rained death and horror down on us every time we sinned. We would be terrified of that God. We might behave ourselves better because we were afraid. But there would be no love for God in the change in our behavior.

But that is not the kind of Father who adopted us. The Holy Spirit made us children of a Father who loves us, a Father who invites us to come to him. When I had small children, I used to love having them come and sit on my lap. Now they're older, of course. But as their father, I hope my children know and will always know that they can come to me with the problems and the needs of their life. I want to help them with everything from new shoes and homework to the more difficult problems of life in a sinful world. But there are things I can't solve. God has adopted us and given us the right to come to him with all the difficulties and all the problems of our lives and he will listen to us and he will answer those prayers.

Now God has given us a new spirit. We know that we can come to him. We consider him to be our Father. That's what Paul means when he says, "By him, we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" *Abba* is the Aramaic word for father. It carries all the affection that a child has for his father, and all the trust and confidence that children

have in their fathers. Children look to their parents to solve their problems and keep them safe. When God adopted us, he gave us a spirit that trusts him like that. When we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven,” we know that we’re looking up to that Father who gave his Son for us and who watches over us and who set Jesus up as the ruler of the universe for our good. He is the one we depend on to make us well when we’re sick and to take care of our finances and to keep us safe from crime and disaster. We trust in him.

All that is ours because God adopted us. That adoption was an act of grace because we could never earn that status. That is the heart of the picture of adoption. When we first had children, my wife and I had to consider who would raise them if we died. Of course, we settled on a close relative. But when we asked that person to take on that responsibility, they didn’t even know our children yet. Our first child wasn’t even born. But already, that aunt loved the baby that was on the way. The unborn child didn’t earn that love, the aunt freely gave it. That’s what adoption is. An adult takes a child to whom they owe nothing and gives them everything.

God owes us nothing. He created us to serve him. He set down the law of love and told us to live according to it. But every one of us is born a sinner. By nature, we love only ourselves. We demand that God be our servant who does what we want rather than our Lord and our King who commands how we should live. Our selfish demand to live as we want to is sin. What we deserve is for God to turn his back on us spoiled sinners and leave us to ruin our own lives and then go to hell. But God sent his Son to die and win eternal life for us. He forgave our sinful pride. He forgave the sin in our hearts. Then he sent his Holy Spirit to us personally and he made us his children. He gave us faith and made us a part of his family.

For most of us that adoption took place when we were baptized. At that moment, before we could even talk, the Holy Spirit entered our hearts and gave us that spirit that looks to God as our Father. That is a moment to cherish. In many families that adopt children, the family celebrates two dates. They celebrate the child’s birthday. But they also celebrate the day when the adoption became final and that child really belonged to them. For the child, that moment of adoption is the moment that the love of the parents is sealed to them forever. God’s grace was sealed to us on the day he gave us faith. We will now belong to him forever.

## II.

Paul said, **“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”** When the Holy Spirit put faith in our hearts, he planted a new believer there. We now have a new and different spirit. That new spirit is living and active. It’s what brings us here on Sunday mornings. It’s what leads us to live as Christians. Every day, our faith testifies in our lives that we are God’s children. As Paul said, God’s children are also God’s heirs. **What does it mean to be adopted? It means that we are heirs with Christ.**

When I was teenager, I inherited my great-great-grandmother’s wedding ring. My mother had kept it for me when I was little. When she gave it to me, she made it clear that I was to keep it and pass it on to one of my children. She wanted it to stay “in the family.” I asked her, “What about an adopted child?” She said, “That would be OK, because an adopted child would still be your child.” Now, I don’t have any adopted children. But if I did, they would be heirs right alongside the biological children God has given me. It works the same way in God’s family. Because we are now God’s children, we are his heirs. We have equal standing in his family.

Now, unlike any human family, our Father in heaven is not going to die someday and leave the universe to us. There will be no fighting over who gets what. But that doesn’t change the fact that we have standing as his heirs. A couple of years ago, I went on field trip with my son to Ford field. They pointed out to us the luxury box that belongs to William Clay Ford Sr., the owner of the Lions. I imagine when his son walks in, everyone who works for the Lions treats him with special respect. He can go places and do things that you and I can’t. He has privileges because he’s the owner’s son. For a few moments, I allowed myself the fantasy of being the owner of the Lions and taking my kids to that luxury box to watch the games from there and introducing them to the players and doing all the things with my children that the Fords get to do because Bill Ford Sr. owns the team.

We are God’s heirs. We have privileges that other people don’t have. The Creator of the universe is our Father. Already now, that means that God has a special interest in our lives. He knows us by name. He hears our prayers and watches over us every day of our lives. Nothing that happens to us is an accident, because our Father in heaven cares for us. And we will live with him forever.

And we are co-heirs with Jesus. God put us on the same level with the Lord. Paul said we have that privilege, **“if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”** In this life, we share in Jesus’ sufferings. Bad things will happen to us here because we belong to God. Just as Bill Ford Jr. has privileges because his father owns Lions, you can’t live in this town without knowing the criticism people have for the Fords’ ownership of that team. Bill Jr. gets his share.

The world that hates our Father hates us, too. We share in the mockery Jesus suffered. We share the physical and emotional pain that the devil and the sinful world inflicted on him. Now, when Jesus suffered those things, he suffered them to pay for our sins. He suffered them to free us from death and hell and give us eternal life. We do not suffer them to earn heaven. We suffer them to stand with our Savior. And to be faithful to Christ, we must be willing to suffer the verbal and even physical abuse unbelievers dish out on believers. But we suffer that abuse because we trust in what is coming: eternal life with Jesus as the sons and daughters of the King.

The Bible teaches that when Jesus returns we will reign with Christ. Now, what that’s really going to mean, I don’t think we can even begin to understand. But it is clearly a position of great privilege. We will share in his glory. He won that glory. He died and he rose to defeat the devil and to free us from our own sin. When he returns, even his enemies will praise him as the conquering hero. The Church of every age will praise him. Then angels in heaven will praise him. And he will give us a seat next to him. We will enjoy his glory for all eternity.

Being adopted by God is a very good deal. It is ours. Today is a festival of the church known as Holy Trinity. Today, we celebrate the God who is three in one. But we are not celebrating an abstract theological formulation. We are celebrating the practical reality of having one God in three persons. The Father sent his Son to win eternal life for us so that he could adopt us as his own. The Son came down from heaven and became a real human being to live and die in our place and then to rise so that we will rise and live as God’s children. The Holy Spirit came to us in the gospel and he gave us faith – he made our adoption real. Now we live as God’s children, in hope of the resurrection to eternal life. In hope of all eternity with our Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.