In August we started a study of the NT book of Galatians. We have discovered that the principal theme of the book of Galatians is that we are saved by believing, not by achieving. No person can earn his salvation. God can't be bought. He loves us just as we are—creatures made in His image and redeemed by His Son—not because of what we've done or haven't done. He has provided eternal life for us, not because of our accomplishments, but purely from His grace.

This morning as we come to the end of chapter 3 and the first part of chapter 4 we find the Apostle offering a new argument against the legalists in Galatia. He deliberates on the tremendous difference between being a son (or daughter) and being a slave. Some of the differences are obvious to us: The son or daughter has the same nature (DNA) as the father; the slave does not. The son or daughter is heir of the father’s entire estate, while the slave is destitute of any inheritance. The son or daughter obeys out of love, while the slave obeys out of fear. The son or daughter has a bright hope and future; the slave has no future.

It’s astounding to Paul, therefore, that individuals who have been redeemed from their slavery to law and to sin, and who have been adopted as sons and daughters of God, should abandon that glorious position and return to slavery to legalism. Yet that is exactly what he sees happening in the churches he planted in Galatia. And sadly, it is also happening in churches today.

I believe today's text, starting in 3:26 and continuing through 4:11, can be summed up in one sentence: “God's grace turns us from slave children into adult sons and daughters. Therefore, we ought to live like what we are.” Let’s read it. Please follow along in your Bible as I read from the NIV:

> You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature
are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

The first proposition Paul presents in this passage is this:

**All true believers in Christ are sons and daughters of God. (3:26-29)**

Paul lived at a time when gender-neutral language was unheard of, when the masculine gender stood for both masculine and feminine and everyone was OK with that. But I think there is little doubt he would have said “sons and daughters,” at least in this passage, if he were writing today. After all, in this very paragraph he tells us there is “neither male nor female” in Christ. I use the inclusive language in my outline this morning because I don’t want anyone to miss the incredible truth found in verse 26: “You are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ.” That is your basic identity as a believer.

Now, of course, we have to understand that the term “all” doesn’t always mean “absolutely all” in the NT. Here Paul clearly does not mean that all human beings are sons and daughters of God, because he limits the “all” in the last phrase of verse 26 to those who have “faith in Christ.” The popular notion of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man is true only in a very limited way. Yes, God is the Father of all human beings in that He created us, and yes, all human beings are brothers and sisters in that we share the image of God in man. But spiritually speaking . . .

**We become sons and daughters only by grace and through faith.** Only faith is mentioned in this verse, but I’m adding grace from other key Scripture passages. For example, Ephesians 2:8 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith.” I believe this gives us an important distinction. It is not our faith that saves us; it is God’s grace that saves us. But by the same token we cannot be saved without faith. Grace is the basis; faith is the channel. Here in Galatians 3:26 Paul is focusing more on the channel than on the basis, and he continues to do so in verse 27.

**We proclaim our new status through baptism.** Verse 27: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” People often ask, “Is this water baptism or Spirit baptism?” And my answer is, “Yes.” It is both, for the Spirit’s baptism of the believer into the Body of Christ at the moment of faith should be followed by water baptism, and in the NT it almost always followed immediately. In fact, there is no such thing as an unbaptized believer in the NT, except for the thief on the cross, and he was really an OT believer because he was saved before the death of Christ.

Now Paul says that when we are baptized we clothe ourselves with Christ. What he means is that the believer in Christ removes the garments of the old life—its habits, its addictions, its attitudes—and replaces those garments by putting on His attitudes, His love, His service. We proclaim our
new status as sons and daughters of God through baptism and we exhibit it through changes in our lives.

We enjoy equality and unity, not only with one another, but also with God’s Chosen People, the Jews. I’m not sure it’s even possible for modern Americans—brought up as they are believing that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights—to fully appreciate the absolutely stunning impact verse 28 must have had on Paul’s listeners: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In his day there were no democratic governments that championed these ideals; there were no philosophers or sociologists that taught it; this was new, radical, and revolutionary.

The equality of believers was absent, not only from ancient society, but even from the OT. The Law of Moses created differences and distinctions—between clergy and laity, between men and women, between Jews and all other ethnic groups, even distinctions between various kinds of food (some kosher and some not) and various animals (some clean and others unclean). Furthermore, the great Temple in Jerusalem had a Court of the Women, beyond which the women could not go. It had a Court of the Gentiles, beyond which they could not go. The Pharisee would pray each morning, “I thank Thee, God, that I am a Jew, not a Gentile; a man, not a woman; a freeman, and not a slave.” Yet according to Paul here in Galatians 3, these age-old distinctions are irrelevant “in Christ.”

I don’t think that means that race, gender, and social status are obliterated or that they should be entirely ignored. Paul was not trying to bring about the political emancipation of the slaves, for that would have been a foolish pipe dream in his day. Nor was he espousing modernist feminist notions that women should exercise all the same roles as men. The point is not that these outward distinctions do not exist, but that they do not matter. They should not be seen as a handicap when it comes to our spiritual relationship to God through Christ. A female, Gentile slave who grew up in paganism enjoyed the same status in the church as a male freeman who grew up in an orthodox Jewish home.

But not only are believers spiritual equals in the Body of Christ; we also enjoy equality and unity with the Chosen People of God in the OT, the Jews. Go back to verse 16 to catch the logic here:

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.” Now skip down to verse 29: If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to promise.

Do you follow him? The promises spoken to Abraham were ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Those who belong to Christ are thus heirs of the spiritual blessings God promised to Abraham. Therefore, the Gentile believer is a full-blooded Jew, spiritually speaking. On the other hand, the Jewish believer has no spiritual advantage over the rest of us. That’s huge.

Now so far the Apostle has established that all true believers in Christ are sons and daughters of
God. Beginning in the first verse of chapter 4, he reminds us that . . .

**Before we became adult sons and daughters of God, we were children and slaves.** *(4:1-7)*

Sometimes we cannot appreciate what we *are* unless we look back at what we *were*.

There is no difference between an heir and a slave in childhood—both are under outside control. “What I am saying (verse 1) is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate.” Have you ever noticed what a great leveler childhood is? When little children get together they are completely unconscious of race, I.Q., wealth, or social status. A kid from a very prominent family can easily become fast friends with an ethnic child from an orphanage. Children have to be taught to discriminate and exclude one another; it doesn’t come naturally. Unfortunately, there are plenty of adults willing to teach them.

Paul picks up on this and speaks of the rich kid who owns an entire estate, perhaps by means of a trust his father has set up. He can be worth millions, but so long as he’s a minor, the power and influence of his wealth are of no advantage to him over the kid who doesn't have a dime to his name. He has no appreciation for the benefits of his status. He can’t make decisions about his inheritance even if he wants to. He’s not in control of his own life. He is told what to do and what not to do in the same way as a slave child. As verse 2 says, “He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father.”

In due time, of course, the child graduates to adulthood. In the Jewish world the date set for coming of age was the first Sabbath after the 12th birthday. In Greece it was 18. The Romans were smarter. They realized that not all children mature at the same level, so the age of majority was flexible—between 14 and 17, depending upon the decision of the father. Paul’s reference to the father setting the date demonstrates that he has the Roman practice in mind.

Now the application of this illustration is provided in verse 3: “So also, when we were children, we were enslaved by the basic principles of the world.” Here’s how I have tried to express Paul’s point:

**In the age of spiritual childhood (i.e. the OT period when the Law of Moses was in effect), God’s people were slaves to the “basic principles of the world.”** Before Christ came God dealt with His people as if they were children, telling them exactly what to do and what not to do. The life of an OT Jew was in many ways comparable to the life of a slave. From the moment he woke up in the morning until he retired at night the Law controlled his life. The dietary restrictions, the ceremonial laws, the numerous holidays and feasts and sacrifices are referred to as the basic principles, the ABC’s, if you will, of religious faith. The Jews were like rich kids who were still minors.

As we have clearly seen in previous weeks, God never intended for His people to treat these
Laws as a means of salvation. The period of childhood was intended to cause them to yearn for freedom through their Messiah and to enjoy that freedom once they reached adulthood. Unfortunately, many who grew up under the Law ended up in bondage to it.

But God didn’t abandon His people in this condition.

**When the time was ripe, God sent His Son to redeem us and adopt us as adult sons and daughters. (4-7)** Just as a date was set by an ancient Roman father as to when his son came of age, so God the Father set a date when He would release His people from the guardianship of the Law, and that was when Christ came into the world. Here's how verse 4 puts it, “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son.”

The reference to the fulness of time means that it happened at just the right moment. It was no accident that Christ was born when he was. For the first time since Babel there was a relatively universal trade language—Greek. The Pax Romana, or Roman peace, enabled extensive travel on excellent Roman roads. The vast network of Jewish synagogues provided the perfect vehicle for the eventual spread of Christianity. All of these things made the time ripe for the coming of God's Son.

Then, too, the fullness of time probably also refers to the spiritual condition of God's people, Israel. Fourteen hundred years under the Mosaic Law had done a number on them, had shown them how hopeless they were, and now some, at least, were ready to hear the good news of salvation and freedom in Christ.

God sent His Son both to redeem and to adopt. Verse 4 says, “God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law.” Each of these phrases is important in explaining how Christ was able to redeem us. First, God sent His Son, indicating the deity of Christ. Second, He was born of a woman, indicating the humanity of Christ. The fact that he says “woman” rather than “human parents” may even be a hint at the virgin birth, though the main thought is surely that he was human as well as divine. Third, He was born under law. That is, He was perfectly familiar with the Law which the Galatian legalists professed to know so much about. In fact, He succeeded in keeping it where they and everyone else failed.

When you put all three of these ideas together they explain redemption in a unique way: If Christ had not been human, He could not have redeemed humans. If He had not been a law-keeper, He could not have redeemed law-breakers. And if He Himself had not been God's Son, He could not have made us sons and daughters of God.

Redemption itself is a beautiful word which paints the picture of a wealthy man going to a slave auction, purchasing a slave and setting him free. That is, in effect, what Jesus did when he died on Calvary, paying the penalty for our sin and releasing us from the necessity to pay with our own lives.
But there's more! Not only did God send His Son to redeem us, but also to adopt us into His family, indicated by the phrase “that we might receive the full right of sons.” It's one thing for a slave to be freed. It's something else entirely for him to be adopted by the plantation owner and made an heir of the estate. You know, there are quite a few stories which come out of the Civil War period concerning the emancipation of slaves. A lot of plantation owners, particularly those who were Christians, became convinced of the evils of slavery and set their own slaves free, hiring them back as workers. But one looks in vain for a slave owner who adopted one of his slaves as his own son and made him heir of the plantation. I'm not sure that ever happened.

But when God set us free from our slavery He took the unprecedented step of adopting us into His family. That is, He gave us all the rights and privileges of sons and daughters, and He wrote us into His will, making us His heirs.

But God not only sent His Son to redeem us and adopts us.

He also sent His Spirit to confirm our new status. A lot of Christian people go through periods of doubt about their spiritual security. They wonder why they haven’t had the same unusual or even supernatural experience someone else has had. But please notice that the way God assures us of our sonship is not primarily by signs or wonders or supernatural gifts, but by the quiet inward witness of the Spirit. Verse 6: “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’”

The Spirit enables us to address God as a Father rather than as a Judge. Nowhere in all the OT do we find God addressed as “Father,” but with the coming of the Spirit believers have that privilege and even more. The Aramaic term “Abba” is actually closer to our term “Papa.” It is a term of great intimacy, one that Jesus Himself used in speaking to His father in Mark 14:36. No slave would ever call his master “papa,” no matter how much trust there was between them. But a son has that privilege. And it's the Holy Spirit who teaches God's children to use the language of sons instead of the language of slaves.

And what's the result of God sending His Son and His Spirit? Verse 7: “So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.” Isn't that incredible? We actually are in line to inherit the vast resources of our Heavenly Father. Think of the implications. Some of us spend most of our lives trying to build up great financial resources, which we can't take with us, and which we won't need anyway where we're going, and which when left behind often corrupt those we leave it to. Yet all the while we are rich because we own the cattle on a thousand hills, the wealth in every mine. Because it belongs to God, it also ultimately belongs to us.

Now beginning in verse 8 Paul drives home his point, which I would summarize this way:

Since we are no longer slaves, but now adult sons and daughters and therefore full heirs, why would we ever want to return to slavery? (4:8-11)
He acknowledges that at one time his readers had something of an excuse for their present legalistic behavior: “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.” In other words, there was a time when they acted like slaves because they were slaves—they couldn't help it. Many of us can look back to a period of slavery in our own experiences. It may not have been slavery to the Mosaic Law, but perhaps slavery to lust, or drugs, or alcohol, or sex, or maybe it was slavery to greed, or power, or pride, perhaps even slavery to religiosity or good works. We treated those things as little gods in our lives, but, of course, they were not really gods at all. If anything they were demons that kept us from God.

But the day of excuses is over, as indicated by the “but now” in verse 9. “But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles?” I have read that some of the slaves who were emancipated by Lincoln, after trying freedom for a while, went back to their old masters and begged to become slaves again. It's not that slavery was so great, but at least there was security in it. The slave didn't have to think; he didn't have to plan; he didn't have to worry about where the next meal was coming from. All the slave had to do was obey the rules and he'd survive.

I've occasionally even read about ex-convicts who purposefully broke the law again so they could return to prison, where at least they had security. We’ve seen that happen in Russia over the past 20 years. A kind of democracy developed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it takes time for democracy to mature and a lot of Russians weren’t willing to give it time. They decided they would rather know they had food and shelter under Communism than worry about it under democracy.

There's something terribly pathetic about a freed slave who begs to go back to his slavery or an ex-con who seeks to return to prison or a person abandon democracy for dictatorship. But there's something even more pathetic about a believer who has come to know God, has experienced His marvelous grace, has been introduced to the amazing freedom that is in Christ, but then decides to turn back to a life whose entire focus is on the do's and don't's of legalism, on the weak and miserable rules and regulations the Law demands.

With pathos in his voice Paul asks, “Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.” Your religious calendar controls your life. Your Christian life has become a dreary routine of ritual and rule. Your faith has degenerated into external formalism. You have dropped out of the school of grace and are enrolling again in the kindergarten of law! How utterly foolish!

**Conclusion:** In conclusion I want to back up to a little parenthetical comment Paul makes in verse 9. It's incredibly profound, but if we aren't careful we could miss it entirely. He says, “But now that you know God—or rather are known by God . . .” It's as though Paul interrupts himself and corrects a possible misunderstanding in his words. “Coming to know God” is a legitimate way to speak of conversion (I’m sure we’ve all used it), but it may subtly convey the impression
that we sought Him out and found Him by our own unaided efforts. In actual fact, the initiative in salvation is *always* with God. We love Him *only* because He first loved us. Therefore, it might be better to speak of our conversion as the time when “God came to know us.”

The word “to know” which is used here is not the term meaning intellectual familiarity. Certainly God knows every human being because He created us, but that’s not the point here. The term “know” is a term used of the most intimate knowledge possible, as when a man knows his wife and the result of that intimate knowledge is that a baby is conceived.

Isn’t it a beautiful thought that believers are known personally and intimately by almighty God as His children! He knows all our problems, our sorrows, our temptations, our failures. This is also kind of a scary thought, for He also knows all our thoughts, dreams, motivations, and actions. But He still loves us! He treats us like adult sons and daughters. He has adopted us and made us heirs of His vast estate. Why should such a son or a daughter act like a slave?

John Newton was an only child and lost his mother when he was 7 years old. He went to sea at the tender age of eleven and later became involved in the unspeakable atrocities of the African slave trade. He plumbed the depths of human sin and degradation. On March 10, 1748, when his ship was in imminent peril of foundering in a terrific storm, he cried to God for mercy. And he found God, or rather God found Him. He was truly converted, and he vowed to never forget how God in His grace saved him, a former blasphemer. In order to imprint it on his memory, he had written in bold letters and fastened across the wall over the mantelpiece of his study the words of Deut. 15:15: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you.”

We were not slaves in Egypt, but we were once slaves somewhere to something, and we should not forget it. Isaiah puts it in this way: “Look to the rock from which you were hewn and the pit from which you were dug.” If only we could remember what we once were, we would have an increasing desire to be what we are now, namely sons and daughters of God set free by Christ.

Does God know you? Is your name written in His book? You say, “No one can be sure of that.” I think you’re wrong. Unless God is a liar, we can know for sure, for He said to us, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” His Word says, “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” You can have eternal life right now if you will admit your sin to God and receive the forgiveness Jesus offers you. Can you think of any good reason not to do that right now?