

Abba

Romans 8:12-17

If you made me pick one chapter of the Bible as my favorite, I think I would always choose Romans 8. There is just so much here, so much profound insight into God and our relationship with him. There is so much here that just captivates my mind, and so much that has shaped my mind from my earliest days as a Christian. I remember as a very young Christian in high school and early in college already focusing my thoughts on this chapter, and in one of the very first attempts I had to teach a Bible study, I remember teaching a lesson on this chapter. So if that enthusiasm comes out as I preach from this chapter, well, good! I hope it is contagious.

The chapter begins with the greatest promise of them all, as we studied last week.

v.1 “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Such a bold statement. Such a declaration of confidence. And assurance. No condemnation. Instead, an established and unbreakable relationship. A family relationship. The relationship between a father and his children. And that is what we come to this morning. A father’s relationship with his children, though presented from our perspective as children—children who are secure, confident, and assured in their relationship with their father.

I was thankful for such a relationship I had as a child with my earthly father. Though he remained rather uninvolved in my life as an adult, that was not my childhood experience. I grew up as the youngest of six children, and during what I would say in hindsight were, by far, the best years of my family’s life together.

They were peaceful years, stable years, successful and happy years. And the root of all of that was the sense of security I had in my father’s consistent presence. Every night we ate dinner together, all eight of us, until my older siblings went off to college. Every night my mom prepared a meal for us all. Every night we were together, and though we all went our various ways in the midst of multiple activities in school and in the community, every night my father sat at the head of our dining room table. Every evening he sat in his chair in the den. Every morning he got up and went to work, and every afternoon he came home. He attended every concert I ever performed in, and watched every baseball or soccer game I played in. Every one. I never doubted for a single moment my identity or my place within the family. I was his son. And I am thankful for that, because I realize so many children didn’t have that privilege of growing up with that sort of security.

My father, however, was not a believer, and so, although he never taught me anything about God or what it meant to serve God, God still used him to teach me about what a father was. God used him to teach me about the security and the confidence of that word in verse 15 of our text this morning, Abba. An Aramaic word for Father. So we read, Abba, Father. And that is our focus this morning, the one to whom Jesus teaches us to pray, Our Father, which art is heaven. But let’s begin with,

I. A REALITY CHECK.

A connection with all that we have studied the past several weeks. And we find that in,
v.12-13

Paul has a consistent point to make, going all the way back to, Rom. 6:1 “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 Certainly not! How shall we who died

to sin live any longer in it?”

Similarly, Rom. 6:15 “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! 16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? 17 But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. 18 And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”

The reality check is this, simply that you cannot claim to be a Christian and live however you want! Truly the gospel promise declares that you are saved by grace through faith, and faith alone. But that grace is not a license to sin. The promise of God’s grace does not give you a license to do what Paul describes in our text as living “according to the flesh.” This is the reality of the situation, that...

A. Living according to the flesh is death.

v.13a

The flesh here would represent the whole of our sinful nature, our fallen nature inherited from Adam and Eve. We studied this last week from,

v.5 “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. 7 Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. 8 So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

The flesh is that which is hostile to God, defined by Paul in, Gal. 5:19 “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Again, the reality check. If you live according to the flesh, you will die. Not simply physical death, but separation from God, spiritual death. Condemnation. So there is never any excuse to sin or to live in sin. But on the positive side, by contrast, the reality is that,

B. Living according to the Spirit is life.

v.13

There is so much there by way of review and reminder. And such a balanced emphasis and encouragement. This is the Christian life, as Paul defines it, a life of “putting to death the deeds of the body.” And the emphasis is clear, as Paul adds, “if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” So it is only by the strength and power supplied by the Holy Spirit that you are enabled to put sin to death; but just as clearly, you are urged and exhorted to put sin to death in yourself. And there is no context in which you can rightly claim to be a Christian and give no attention to the ongoing battle with sin.

So we have a debt, Paul writes. An obligation. We are debtors, verse 1. As those saved by grace, redeemed by the grace of God, we incur a debt of love. A debt of gratitude. To live according to the Spirit. That’s the reality check for those who think or act as if the grace of God were an excuse to continue in

sin. We are called to be those who “do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

And that reality brings a great encouragement from Paul. A very great encouragement, greater than any other personal description of true believers,

v.14

Thus Paul introduces us to,

II. THE REALITY OF ADOPTION.

That is the relationship that replaces the relationship between a judge and a defendant in a court. It is the relationship between a father and a son, a parent and a child—family relationship, and that is the great blessing. And notice the contrast with which Paul introduces this family relationship,

v.15

Isn't that marvelous. A defendant in a courtroom has fear in the presence of the judge. A defendant fears the judgment he will receive, the condemnation. And as Christians, as believers, it is that fear that is removed, fear that is actually bondage. But, Paul says, “you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear.” We are not enslaved by the fear of condemnation, the dread anticipation of the wrath and justice of God. That's not the spirit we received, we who believe in Jesus. That is what John is explaining in,

1 John 4:17 “Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. 19 We love Him because He first loved us.”

This is so liberating. So helpful. We are not in bondage. We are not given over to the fear of condemnation, the fear of rejection. Because we are given “the Spirit of adoption.” The spirit of sonship, as some would translate. The spirit by which, by whom, we can address God as our Father. Abba.

A. Adoption removes the fear of condemnation.

I believe the reference here is the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of adoption. He, the second person of the Trinity, is the one by whom we are united to our father within this marvelous family. And that is the contrast? Again, it is fear or adoption. One or the other. Fear of condemnation? Or the security of a family relationship—a relationship based on the natural love between a parent and a child? That's the contrast. And that really is the very definition of what it means to be a Christian. As John writes,

John 1:12 “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

A Christian is someone who is born, born again, not of the flesh. But born of God, born by the will of God, the choice of God. Adoption is an act of love. It is a choice to love. There is, of course, something of a choice with a natural born child, but in reality, that choice never exists. If you bear a child, or beget a child, unless your sin causes you to suppress your natural humanity, you love. It's your child, your son or your daughter. And so you love, by definition.

But with adoption, that commitment to love is made as a conscious choice. And yet, it is no less a bond than the love given to a natural born child. As John puts it,

1 John 3:1 “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!”

Too often, I think, we don't emphasize this aspect of our salvation enough. We speak about justification, and rightly so, as the hinge upon which the whole of God's work of redemption would turn. It is central to our understanding of salvation. We speak about sanctification, that ongoing work of God in the lives of his people, so obviously practical and personal. We even speak about glorification, the future when we shall be made perfect in glory. We speak about faith and repentance as the instrument by which we become Christians. But perhaps we don't talk often enough about adoption.

So what is adoption? Our shorter catechism puts it this way, "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." More fully, in the Westminster Confession of Faith, adoption is that "by which [we] are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have his name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him, as by a father: yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation."

Indeed, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." There is no fear of condemnation. There is no bondage to that fear. Instead, there is adoption!
v.15

So it is that,

B. Adoption established our relationship with God.

Justification may well free us from the judgment of condemnation, but adoption enables us to cry out, Abba, Father.

Gal. 4:6 "And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ."

Such a great privilege. A relationship established to be permanent. A relationship defined to be so personal, Abba, Father. This coming Saturday I'll have the great privilege of walking my oldest daughter down the aisle of a church where her husband-to-be waits for her. And what is the basis of that most meaningful tradition? I'm her father, and for nearly 26 years that relationship has been established, unbroken, and sealed with the permanence of love. That's the image God gives to us for our relationship with him. It's not the relationship of a slave to a master, but one of a son to a father. And that relationship has great privileges.

III. THE PRIVILEGES OF ADOPTION.

The privilege, of course, is the privilege of access, he is our Abba. Our father. But Paul adds to that understanding of this privilege with this concept of confidence and assurance.

A. Assurance of our relationship with God as his children.

So it is that,
v.16

The question might well be, "How do you know?" How do you know he is your father? And the answer isn't a theological one or a doctrinal one. The answer isn't a verbal definition, but rather a very, subjective experience. An experience worked in a believer by the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

So if I asked one of our younger children, “Who is your father?”, the answer would be obvious. Who is your father? He is! That’s how secure the relationship is. No doubt. No uncertainty. No questioning. Rather, complete assurance. The relationship is established deep inside the heart and soul of the child.

So it is in relationship to God our father. How do you know? Not by reading a chapter from the Westminster Confession or memorizing an answer from the catechism. That might help, of course, and those are good things to do, but that’s not where your assurance comes from. The privilege of adoption is that God the Holy Spirit bears witness with your spirit! Such that you cry out with unshakable confidence, “Abba, Father.”

I can’t read you something from the Bible, and then pronounce an assurance upon you. As a minister of the gospel, I can pronounce a blessing, as I do when I read the benediction. I can pronounce an exhortation, which I do every time I preach. I can pronounce you married. The state even recognizes that authority. I can pronounce your body to be handed over to the grave. I can pronounce you ordained and installed as an elder or a deacon. But I can’t pronounce an assurance of salvation for you. But the Holy Spirit of adoption can. And he works in the hearts of God’s true people to give them that sense that God is their father and that they are his child.

With the further encouragement of one additional privilege,

B. Confidence of our inheritance from God as his children.

v.17

When I was a young child, I received an inheritance from one

of my grandparents, and then as a young adult, another inheritance from the other set of grandparents. And when my own father passed away several years ago, he, too, he included in his legal papers an inheritance for each of his children, and grandchildren. Each one of those gifts was a great blessing at a very significant point of my life, and the reality of that sort of inheritance is easily understood, isn’t it? That’s one of the privileges of sonship, here, of adoption. An adopted child doesn’t have a second class status. There is no legal restraint on an inheritance. There is no legal differentiation. All children, whether naturally born into a family or received by adoption are granted full legal status as heir. And that is what God promises us.

Notice something in verse 17 that is absolutely astounding. Not only are we heirs of God, rightly receiving our inheritance from him, but we become joint-heirs with Jesus! We gain our inheritance with Jesus! What he inherits, we inherit with him. To put it another way, skip down just a few verses,

v.29 “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

Don’t let the gender language be a bother, for just as the word man is often and commonly used for all mankind, so is brothers. The language certainly includes and applies to all Jesus’ brothers and sisters, all those who, by faith, have trusted in him for their salvation. All those who, by the grace of God, have been adopted into his family and call upon God as their father.

We are joint-heirs with Jesus, just as my brothers and sisters and I were joint heirs of my parents estate when they died. But what do we inherit as the children of God? To answer that simply, everything. We inherit everything, specifically the new heaven and the new earth.

Rev. 21:6 And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. 7 He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.”

In the simple words of Jesus,
Mat. 5:5 “Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.”

We shall inherit the kingdom of God, we who have been received by adoption into the family of God. That’s our confidence. That’s the blessing.

Let me end by returning to that idea of the reality check. This isn’t a promise given to the wicked, to the unfaithful. This isn’t a promise given to those who live according to their flesh, living in their sin without faith and repentance. It is, rather, a promise given to those who believe in Jesus. And to you who do believe, it is your great privilege as children of God.

John 1:12 “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

May the assurance of those blessings be yours, as you believe unto salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.