

Living as Sons and Daughters of God

READING 03 • Timothy J. Keller

Abridged from Facing Life with Confidence, Teaching E, “Living as Sons and Daughters of God,” pp. 144–158; selected in Gospel Fluency II.

Condensed participant edition: selected and abridged for length; original argument and attribution retained.

© Timothy J. Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2003.

In Romans 8:15 we read, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you have received the Spirit of sonship [adoption].” Although the concept of “adoption” is not introduced in Romans until this point, the contrast in v. is a summation of all Paul has been saying up until this point about the two basic ways to live. The two fundamentally different ways to live are not as religious or as irreligious; but as a slave, full of fear, or as a child of God, full of faith working through love.

Paul says we must not live “according to the sinful nature” (8:13). Why? Because, “you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again.” It is clearly possible, then, to fall back and live as slaves even though we are children. This is the same as forgetting we are not “under the law” and living as if we are (6:14). The purpose of the book of Romans is to get Christians to see their position as justified and adopted sons and daughters of God, and then to begin living as such.

The “negative” side is repentance, to discover the particular idolatries of the heart (Col. 3:5), our besetting sins (Heb. 12:1), and uproot them at the motivational level (Rom. 8:13). The “positive” side is faith, to see ourselves as perfect in Christ (Col. 3:1), who has done from first to last all that was required for my acceptance (Heb. 12:2), so that we could be adopted as sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:14). This is the dynamic — a) we uproot the idols of the heart, and b) we live out of our identity as children of God.

These two elements must go together. Each stimulates the other; if either one is de-emphasized it robs the other also of any power. On the one hand, without a knowledge of our extreme sin and idolatry, the payment of Christ on the cross seems trivial, and the message of it does not electrify or transform. On the other hand, without a knowledge of our complete acceptance and adoption through Christ, the message of our sin would so crush us that we would deny or repress it. But — the more you know of his infallible fatherly love, the more you are able to realistically face yourself, your flaws and faults, and the more you see your sin, the more precious and valuable do you find his saving love and grace.

Understanding our adoption

If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. [Adoption] is the highest privilege the gospel offers... But... adoption is higher, because of the richer relationship with God that it involves.

J. I. Packer, Knowing God, chapter 19

Adoption is not a change in nature, but a change in status. If we fail to see this truth, we will reject the power of our adoption... Adoption is a declaration God makes about us. It is irreversible, dependent entirely upon His gracious choice.

Sinclair Ferguson, Children of the Living God

All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption: by which they 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.

Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 12

The Spirit of adoption

We are sons, but we are in danger of having the mindset of hired servants... That is why he sends us the Spirit of adoption... Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit... [which] brings us into a deep-seated persuasion that we really are the sons of God. If it is a fact that... God has adopted us into his family, then the Spirit assures us this is true, and enables us to live in the enjoyment of such a rich spiritual blessing.

Sinclair Ferguson, Children of the Living God

The problem: "Because I did not believe God loved me on the basis of Christ's life, death, and resurrection — The result: [therefore] I could not face the risk of seeing my sins as my own responsibility... The turning: But now I understood what Luther was talking about: 'in the righteousness of faith we work nothing, we render nothing to God, but we only receive and allow another to work in us.' This was Christ's righteousness, bought with the price of his blood on the cross. This I received by faith."

Rose M. Miller, From Fear to Freedom

The life of sons and daughters

“Gospel holiness”... was Puritan shorthand for authentic Christian living, springing from love and gratitude to God, in contrast with the spurious “legal holiness” that consisted merely of forms, routines and outward appearances, maintained from self-regarding motives... The sins of God’s children do not destroy their justification or nullify their adoption, but they mar the children’s fellowship with [and their family likeness to] the Father.

J. I. Packer, Knowing God, chapter 19

All Christians are, in fact, called to a life of faith, in the sense of following God’s will at whatever cost and trusting him for the consequences... On those thus tempted in the life of faith, Jesus brings the truth of their adoption to bear... “Do not worry about your life... your heavenly Father knows what you need...” (Mt. 6:31–33).

J. I. Packer, Knowing God, chapter 19

The privileges of God’s family

As we fix our eyes upon ourselves, our past failures, our present guilt, it seems impossible that the Father should love us. Many Christians go through much of their life with the prodigal’s suspicion... That is why in the Greek text John’s statement about the Father’s love begins... Behold! — look and see.

Sinclair Ferguson, Children of the Living God

“Abba” was the word that was used familiarly by children talking to their fathers... We cry “Abba, Father”... God is no longer to us a distant God. He is not merely a God in whom we believe intellectually, theologically, theoretically, doctrinally only... Our worship and praying are spontaneous... and not only spontaneity, but confidence.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Romans 8:5–17

Jesus encourages us to pray simply... The child of God knows he is speaking to the Father, and talks simply and directly... Jesus also encourages us to pray boldly... Boldness [which is] impudence in a neighbor is the privilege of the children of the family.

Sinclair Ferguson, Children of the Living God

We are to learn to accept and appreciate one another, no matter what natural differences might separate us... Such a mixture of discipline and forgiveness is conceivable only within a family context... Only when we realize that the Church is a family, that we are brothers and sisters in that family, will we have a right perspective from which to view those who fail badly.

Sinclair Ferguson, Children of the Living God

Adoption is incomplete in this world... Although we have already received the Spirit of adoption... we are still waiting for the full experience of our sonship, for “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). The redemption of our bodies, our adoption in all its glory, takes place at the final resurrection.

Sinclair Ferguson, Children of the Living God

From a slave mentality to the freedom of a child

Slave: “Faith” is trying hard to do good and be better, establishing your own record (a “righteousness”) so God and others will accept you. Child: Faith is a discipline of remembering and living every moment as an accepted child of God.

Slave: “Obedience” focuses nearly completely on external duties. Examination of attitudes and motivations is too traumatic and is ignored. Child: Obedience is seeking to please God first in our attitude of love, then in obeying his will.

Slave: Compulsive obedience. Obeys God and moral codes out of fear of rejection — a compulsive, driven moralism. Child: Obeys out of joy in your Father and out of gratitude for the certainty of his love.

Slave: Hiding. Lots of strategies to hide our inner and outer failings from ourselves and one another. Child: Open and transparent. Freedom from having to put up a front. Able to appreciate people who are different and hurting.

Slave: Begrudging repentance. Admitting failure is destructive of one’s very basis for living (that being a sense of moral adequacy). Child: Admitting failure is the basis of a Christian’s self-image as adopted child. Repentance reminds anew of magnitude of his love. Repentance quick, willing.

Living from adoption in ordinary life

Individual sinful acts have sinful motivations. When we ask why we are moved to particular sins, we discover that our sins come because we still seek to find our “justification” (our identity, our sense of worthiness) in other things. Thus, to remember that we are completely loved and righteous in Christ undermines and saps our motives and desires for sin.

Recognize that ordinarily both motives are present. But your fear, pride, anxiety, hurt feelings, anger will be a good indicator of a high level of “works” motivation present. There is no way for motives to be totally pure. The goal is to continually refine them.

As you do “normal activities,” identify the motives of the sin-nature (the “under the law” nature). Repent of them. Now articulate the motives of the Spirit-nature. Say them to yourself as you proceed through the activity. Constantly reinforce “adopted-child” motives.