

All Roads Lead Here: All In The Family
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 43:1-7; Mark 3:31-35; Romans 8:9-17

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 8:9-17. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation -- but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 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.”

Have you ever wanted to rent a wife? Turns out Rent-A-Wife is a service started in 1980 that’s still going today. A Californian by the name of Karen Donovan started it to help people decorate their homes, balance checkbooks, run errands – you get the picture. She originally joked that she wanted to start Rent-A-Family too. She said, “[Rent-A-Family] can come over and eat all the food, turn on all the lights, put handprints on the walls, take showers and leave the towels on the floor. When clients are finished with Rent-A-Family, they’ll have to call Rent-A-Wife.” Rent-A-Wife still exists today, despite the fact that people on the Internet hate the name, primarily because most of their customers are women.

But that isn’t the way family works, is it? You can’t rent family. Lots of different kinds of families form in a lot of different ways – through blood, adoption, marriage. Sometimes we create a kind of “family” out of a group of friends. Churches our size are called “family churches” because they’re made up of several families that become a kind of family. But you can’t rent family, you can’t force family...you can’t require someone be a part of a family unit, even if they share your DNA.

Today’s passage is about the family of God and what it looks like. Paul describes some of the characteristics of those who are sons and daughters of God. There’s a sentimental idea in our culture that we all are to be children of God, but God thinks differently. And today, we’re going to see how God’s family is marked by Him, loved by Him, and promised a future by Him.

The first element of being a child of God is *being marked by God with the Holy Spirit*. It might help us to think of the Holy Spirit as the DNA test of Christians. Christians have the Spirit of God living within them. It is a necessity.

History and superstition have created this idea that we have to answer questions from St. Peter to be let into the gates of heaven. Scripture speaks of judgment day when every hidden thing will be made known and we have to answer for ourselves. But it doesn't talk about having the right answers as the way into heaven. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life – no one comes to the Father except through me."

We come to be accepted by God through faith and trust in Jesus. And if we have faith and trust in Jesus, we're given the Holy Spirit as a gift. He lives and moves in us. If we have the Spirit, we're in. If we don't, we aren't. The Spirit is the indelible mark of those who belong to God. When God sent the final plague on Egypt to set the Jewish people free, He had the Jews mark their doorposts with the blood of a lamb so judgment passed over them. The mark of the Spirit is on our hearts and lives so judgment passes over us.

The way we see the mark of the Spirit on our lives is a change in our heart attitude and disposition. We've discussed this at length the last few weeks, but here's the key: we no longer want to live in sin; we want to please Christ. We fail at times, but our desire is to be like our Savior. We are led by God's Spirit into God's ways. To have the mark of the Spirit is to find our hearts disappointed by our sins and gladdened when we conquer them. To have the mark of the Spirit is to want to join in with what God is doing around the world, even though it comes at a real cost. Believers want God to be glorified and want to be satisfied in Him alone.

The sin nature doesn't completely leave us. We still die because of the sin nature still attached to us. We need resurrection – not just life given to our old body, but the transformation of our current bodies into ones that are pure and holy. And that's the promise we have when we are marked by the Holy Spirit. At the command of the Father, at the perfect time, the Holy Spirit will raise us to new life. Our bodies will be redeemed, made new, and we'll no longer be tempted to sin. That sin nature will not be resurrected – and we can give thanks for that!

Now we have to put in the disclaimer – not everyone who claims Jesus is marked with the Spirit. Not everyone who says they are a child of God is. In John 8, Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders. They claimed Abraham was their forefather and thus they had rights to God's Kingdom. Jesus said, "Your father is the devil!" Why? Because they rejected Him, God's Son. They rejected God's ways. Only those who follow Jesus and trust in Him are God's children.

Does God love everyone? Can we say to somebody on the street, "God loves you"? In a sense, yes. God created everyone, and He cares for His creation; He gives everyone good gifts. In Matthew 5, Jesus says, "God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." But God does not love everyone with a redemptive, saving love. He has reserved His saving love for those whom He has chosen, who come to His Son in hope and trust. Believers are the ones who can rightfully say, "We are God's sons and daughters."

Let's move on to that thought: the second element of being a child of God is *being loved by God*. God loves the followers of His Son with an incredible, amazing, unbelievable love. He overlooks everything we've done and He redeems us through Jesus. He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit so we're never alone. And He gives us the title "son of God," "daughter of God."

We need to come to a new understanding of adoption because our culture is offended by adoption. It's incredibly beautiful and self-sacrificing, but Americans are not fans of it. Bad adoptive parents are the norm in our literature and media. In the original *Pete's Dragon*, Pete runs away from his crazy adoptive family who wants him to be their slave. In the *Harry Potter* series and the followup *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*, adoptive and foster parents are unbelievably cruel. The recent *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies have a couple of the worst adoptive dads you can imagine. Even Anne from the beloved *Anne of Green Gables* has troubles with her adoptive mother Marilla, who didn't really want Anne; it takes her a great deal of time to love her. What bigger insult can one kid yell at another than, "You're adopted"?

While there are literally tens of thousands of families waiting to adopt children in America, we dislike the idea of it so much that statistically, almost all young women faced with an unplanned pregnancy will either have an abortion or raise the child herself than to put the child up for adoption. It's why many families have turned to international adoptions; they want to raise a child, but there are no children to adopt. When we read the Bible and hear that God adopts us, we wonder what that means. Do we want to be adopted by God? Are we the red-headed stepchild or worse?

That's not the case in the Roman world Paul wrote to. Adoption was serious business. There was no secrecy or shame around adoption. Usually, it was the oldest boy who was adopted. He was not cut off from his birth parents. Adopted children were privileged in ways that many natural born sons were not because they kept their original family ties and gained the ties of their new family. It was a huge part of Roman politics. In fact, eight Roman emperors were adopted into their positions. To be adopted in the Roman world meant to be wanted. The adopted son received more of his adoptive father's trust than his own children, and the adopted son reflected more of his adoptive father's traits. Adoption was held in high esteem.

When we are given the Spirit of adoption, it means that we no longer are slaves to our former master of sin. We are marked as God's chosen children. We are free to live as our true Father commands us. We gratefully obey because we want to please God, who sacrificed His own Son so that we could become His children alongside Jesus. God wants us. He loves us and chose us to be His own. He rescues us. So when you hear that you are adopted in God's family, have pride in that. Have pride that He has called you, chosen you, calls you "daughter," calls you "son." It is a badge of honor.

And here's how deep the honor goes: God wants us to call Him "father." Jesus introduced the idea that God is our personal Father to the world. Jesus knows God the Father intimately, as Father. He told us to address God that way, and Paul confirms it. We have the right to use the most intimate of names for God the Father – "Abba," Daddy, Papa.

Because we've heard it so often, we don't think much about calling God "Father." Yet this was crazy talk to the Jewish people, and it still is to virtually every seriously religious person coming from outside of Christianity. Absolutely, God was the "father" of the Jewish people; they would refer to God as the "father" of their nation and their people. The Jewish people saw God as exclusively theirs.

But to pray to God as Father, to call Him that, to address Him so informally, this was unheard of, close to blasphemy. It was one thing to call God the “father of Israel” or “our father” speaking about the Jewish nation. But every time the Pharisees heard Jesus talk of “my father” in a personal sense, it drove them crazy. Who could claim this kind of intimacy with the God of thunder and lightning at Mount Sinai, who parted the Red Sea, who crushed the powerful nations around tiny Israel and brought them to nothing? And that’s to say nothing of other religions that would not dare to approach their gods in such an informal manner. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, the other major world religions, know nothing of a Father God.

Yet not only are we given the privilege of approaching the God of all creation with the name Father, we’re expected to do it. Jesus taught us to address Him that way in the Lord’s Prayer. Every apostle who writes a letter to the early churches gives praise to God our Father. And that special name “Abba” is used at least three times – once by Jesus and twice by Paul.

We are so blessed. We are not only adopted as God’s children, but we get to address Him and think of Him as the perfect papa, the heavenly Father. We belong to Him and we are close to Him. Don’t ever discount God’s love for you. Jesus moved heaven and earth with His blood so we could know what it is to be loved by our true Father.

Finally, the third element of being a child of God is *being promised a future by God*. No one knows what the future holds, but we assume it’s not good. Whether it’s terminators, aliens, or zombies, we fear some unstoppable terror will destroy us all. If not that, we have the horrible societies of *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner* – or if we’re older, the societies of *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Brave New World*. We no longer believe in the humanistic optimism of the 1960s *Star Trek*, possibly because we’ve come to realize that humanity can’t create the perfect society *Star Trek* thought could get to the stars.

But God’s vision of the future is one of hope for us. Paul teaches that the immediate future for Christians includes suffering. We suffer as we put away the sin that pulls at us so hard. We suffer as we stand for the faith even when society mocks it. We don’t suffer as many believers around the world do for their faith, but we realize that it is a future possibility.

But God has always been interested in the long game, and that’s where the real hope lies. We have a promise of resurrection. We have been promised the renewal of our bodies so that our future won’t be contaminated with the sin of our pasts. We have the promise that we will enter God’s Kingdom as His sons and daughters.

And perhaps the strongest hope we have for our future is that we are not beggars at God’s table. While Jesus and the disciples and the saints that come before us will have the seats of privilege and honor, we are not second class citizens of the Kingdom any more than there are second class children of God. As children, we are heirs with God and co-heirs with Christ. We inherit all of God – all that He has, all that He has created, everything that God has touched, it belongs to us together with Christ. And unlike an earthly inheritance where the father must die for the children to claim the inheritance, our loving heavenly Father will be with us always.

We will share in Christ's glory. As we share in His sufferings, we share in His glory. Isn't that amazing? There's nothing in our earthly selves worth saying, "That has eternal value." But once God has claimed us, called us children, and sent us His Spirit, we have the reflection of God in us that is worth praising. It is not from us, but it comes alive within us as we move at the Holy Spirit's leading. We inherit the Kingdom of God as heirs and we share in the glory and wonder of it – not physical glory like gold or silver or TVs or cars, but the glory of God's goodness and love manifested in ways that we can't even comprehend now.

This is truly wonderful news. If you belong to Christ, you are marked with the Spirit, you are loved by the Father, and you are promised an inheritance with Jesus Himself. It is worth every difficulty and trial and suffering caused by being a faithful witness. It is going to make all the luxuries and wealth of this world seem like so much dirt in comparison. The only question now is, will you exercise that faith? Will you trust in Jesus and be marked by the Spirit, if you haven't been already? Turn to Him, my friends. Turn to Him for the first time, if you haven't, and turn to Him daily if you already have, that we might know the Spirit, know the love of God, and know the promises He has in store for us.