

THE APEX OF GOD'S GRACE: THE DOCTRINE OF ADOPTION

Doctrines of Salvation

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DOCTRINES OF SALVATION SERIES PART 10

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In the last three articles dealing with justification by faith alone, we observed that justification is a legal declaration of God in which a person's sins are forgiven and Christ's righteousness is imputed to him being received by faith alone. We also noted that justification and true saving faith are demonstrated in a person's life by the fruits they produce; if a person claims to have saving faith and be justified before God, but has no subsequent works, that claim to faith is spurious.

This article deals with another legal declarative work of God, the doctrine of adoption. The believer's adoption into God's family occurs simultaneously with justification. At the same time God declares a sinner not guilty and righteous, he also adopts him into his family. The doctrine of adoption encapsulates the apex of God's mercy toward those who deserve his judgment and wrath. Instead of pouring out his wrath on those who justly deserve it, God elects them to salvation with the goal of election being their adoption into his family (Eph. 1:4-6), regenerates their hearts, grants them faith and repentance, and justifies and adopts them into his family. The doctrine of adoption is an extraordinary manifestation of God's mercy and love to his people. Surprisingly, very little has been written on this doctrine throughout church history. Dr. D. James Kennedy comments on this: "Luther had little to say about it and Calvin ignored it almost entirely. The great theologian Jean Alphonse Turretin confused it with the second part of justification wherein man is clothed with righteousness and made righteous in the sight of God. To be made righteous in the sight of the law is entirely different than to be received into the house of the Father. We find the well-known theologian Robert Lewis Dabney followed in the train of Turretin and made the same mistake. Even the great systematic theologian, Charles Hodge, omits it from the paragraph headings of his volumes. However, the Westminster Confession of Faith does contain a brief chapter on adoption" (Truths That Transform, p. 88, 89). Even though this doctrine has often been neglected or ignored, it is a crucial part of the gospel message in the Scriptures and a doctrine of special importance in our current theological climate.

THE DOCTRINE OF ADOPTION PRESUPPOSES THAT MAN IS NOT NATURALLY A PART OF GOD'S FAMILY

The doctrine of adoption presupposes that we are not naturally a part of God's family, but must be adopted into that family through an action of God. This biblical teaching strongly opposes the mindset of our culture that assumes everybody is a child of God.

In 19th century theological liberalism, there was an emphasis on man's response to concepts of

deity and religion. The discipline of comparative religion in which the religions and religious practices of various cultures is examined came out of this emphasis. There was attempt to discover the essence or core concepts of religious thought that were common to all religions around the world. Adolph von Harnack, in examining various religious thoughts and practices, coined the phrase that became the mantra of theological liberalism in the 19th century and has continued as a major heretical concept in the 20th century. Harnack said that the essence of religion could be summarized by the phrase, "the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man." What philosophers and theologians teach in one century often becomes the worldview or perspective of the average person in the next century. This concept of the universal Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man is a common idea today and has been the impetus behind the theology of universalism, the idea that everyone is saved in the end.

When I was in sixth grade, I remember singing a little song in choir that subtly taught this theological heresy. The song was titled, "Let There Be Peace On Earth." During the middle part of the song, we sang, "If God is our Father, brothers all are we. Let me walk with my brother in perfect harmony." The song almost repeated verbatim the phrase, "the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man." The Bible does not teach that man in his fallen state is naturally a part of God's family. Dr. J. I. Packer writes: "What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God for his Father.

But cannot this be said of every man, Christian or not? Emphatically no! The idea that all men are children of God is not found in the Bible anywhere. The Old Testament shows God as the Father not of all men, but of His own people, the seed of Abraham. 'Israel is my son, even my firstborn: and I say unto thee, Let my son go. . . .' (Exodus 4:22f). The New Testament has a world vision, but it too shows God as the Father, not of all men, but of those who, knowing themselves to be sinners, put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as their divine sin-bearer and master, and so become Abraham's spiritual seed. 'Ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus. . . ye all are one man in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed' (Galatians 3:26ff.). Sonship to God is not, therefore, a universal status which everyone enters by natural birth, but a supernatural gift which one receives through receiving Jesus. . . . The gift of sonship to God becomes ours, not through being born, but through being born again. 'As many as received Him, to them gave He the power to become sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:12,13)" (Knowing God, p. 181). J. I. Packer rightly states that being a child of God is not a natural state to fallen man; being adopted into God's family is an act of God's grace and mercy through Christ. The term adoption itself refers to a relationship that is not natural, but a change in families through legal declaration. If every person is naturally a part of God's family, then the concept of adoption in our salvation is a meaningless term. In fact, to assume that every person is a part of God's family apart from Christ's work of salvation, is to cheapen the grace of God in the gospel. John Murray writes: "To substitute the message of God's universal fatherhood for that which is constituted by redemption and adoption is to annul the gospel; it means the degradation of this highest and richest of relationships to the level of that relationship which all men sustain to God by creation. In a word, it is to deprive the gospel of its redemptive meaning. And it encourages men in the delusion that our creaturehood is the guarantee of our adoption into God's family" (Redemption:

Accomplished and Applied, p. 135, 136).

THE DOCTRINE OF ADOPTION PRESUPPOSES AN ULTIMATE DIVISION OF MANKIND

The Bible clearly teaches that there is one ultimate division in mankind: those who are adopted into God's family as a result of faith in Christ and have God as their Father and those who are outside of Christ and have the devil as their spiritual father. In John 8:38-44, Jesus confronted some of the Jews with the truth that God was not their Father: "I speak the things which I have seen with my Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father.' They answered and said to Him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. But as it is, you are seeking to kill me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. You are doing the deeds of your father.' They said to him, 'We are not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me; for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.'" This group of people believed they were children of God because they were ethnic descendants of Abraham. Jesus first told them that if Abraham were their father, they would do the deeds of Abraham; in other words, believe in him. He then told them that God was not their father (verse 42), but that the devil was their spiritual father (verse 44). There is no neutral position. A person either has God as his Father through adoption or he has the devil as his father in his natural fallen state.

This division in mankind is also set forth in Jesus' explanation of the parable of the wheat and the tares. Matthew 13:36-43 states: "Then He left the multitudes, and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.' And He answered and said, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are the angels. Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His Kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire, in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'" This passage is important because it does not isolate a particular group of people to whom Jesus is speaking as the John 8 passage does. In his explanation of the parable of the wheat and tares, Jesus emphatically contrasts the children of God with the children of the devil. Since the passage speaks of a division between the lost and redeemed at the end of the age, it supports the idea that there is no neutral position. Every individual is either a member of God's family through being adopted into it as a part their salvation or they are members of Satan's family and kingdom by virtue of their being fallen in Adam.

1 John 3:10-12 also shows this division in man between the children of God and the children of the devil: "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another;

not as Cain, who was of the evil one, and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous." Simon Kistemaker writes concerning this passage: "In this entire letter John presents our existence in terms of two categories: you are either a child of God or you are a child of the devil. John sees only absolutes: light or darkness, truth or the lie, God or the devil, life or death. For him there is no middle ground. There are no alternatives" (Commentary on 1 John in the New Testament Commentary Series, p. 304).

The above passages show that there is only one ultimate division in mankind: those who are in Christ are adopted into God's family and belong to his kingdom and those outside of Christ are naturally a part of the devil's family and belong to his kingdom. The concept of the universal Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man is utterly foreign to the teaching of Scripture. The question that you must face is, to which family do I belong? Have you been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, granted faith and repentance, and been justified and adopted into God's family as a result? There is no neutral ground.

ADOPTION IS THE APEX OF GOD'S MERCY AND GRACE

The highest privilege that can be bestowed on a person is to be adopted into God's family. In our salvation, God not only redeems us from our sins and imputes Christ's righteousness to us, but also adopts us into his very family. J. I. Packer writes: "Some textbooks on Christian doctrine - Berkhof's, for instance - treat adoption as a mere sub-section of justification, but this is inadequate. The two ideas are distinct, and adoption is the more exalted. Justification is a forensic idea, conceived in terms of law and viewing God as judge. In justification, God declares of penitent believers that they are not, and never will be, liable to the death that their sins deserve, because Jesus Christ, their substitute and sacrifice, tasted death in their place on the cross. This free gift of acquittal and peace, won for us at the cost of calvary, is wonderful enough, in all conscience - but justification does not of itself imply any intimate or deep relationship with God the judge. In idea, at any rate, you could have the reality of justification without any close fellowship with God resulting. But contrast this, now, with adoption. Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the father is greater" (Knowing God, p. 187, 188).

John 1:12,13 shows the connection between regeneration, faith in Christ, and adoption: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." This passage states that those who receive or believe in Him (Jesus) are given the right or authority to become children of God. Faith is a prerequisite to adoption; only those who believe in Christ become children of God. This verse also teaches an important truth concerning the relationship of regeneration, faith, and adoption. Verse 13 states that those who believe and are consequently adopted into God's family are those who have first of all been born of God. They were not born of God because of anything in themselves (not "the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man"). This demonstrates again the grace of God in our salvation. A

person is born of God solely by the sovereign monergistic work of God, is granted faith, and as a result of the exercise of that faith is justified and adopted into God's family.

The mercy and grace of God in the believer's adoption into God's family is especially vivid in light of the teaching of Scripture that fallen man is naturally a part of the devil's family and kingdom. On a human level, when an adoption occurs, a child is placed up for adoption. A parent or parents may place a child up for adoption because of economic hardship or a child may be orphaned or abandoned. In these cases, a child is released from its natural family connection to be legally adopted into a new family. For example, in 1997 my wife and I adopted a baby girl from China. Part of the legal paperwork concerning her adoption mentioned that she was found abandoned at a government building and, after a diligent search for her natural parents, she was placed in the Mao Ming Welfare Home with the hopes that she would be adopted. In the case of the believer's adoption into God's family, however, the devil does not place his children up for adoption or release them willingly. God, out of his mercy and eternal plan of election, sovereignly takes a person out of the family and kingdom of Satan and places them in his family and kingdom. Colossians 1:13, 14, in speaking of God, the Father adopting us into his family, states: "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin."

The same theme of being delivered from Satan and his kingdom is found in 2 Timothy 2:24-26: "And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will." While neither of these passages mentions the concept of adoption and speaks in general terms of God being the divine initiator of our salvation, the idea of being delivered is from the dominion of Satan's kingdom and control is strongly set forth. This idea of deliverance from the devil's rule and reign relates closely to the concept of God adopting us out of the spiritual family and kingdom of Satan. In Adoption, God not only takes us out of Satan's family, but as part of our salvation he changes our citizenship from Satan's kingdom to God's kingdom. Philippians 3:20 says, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. . . ."

THE DOCTRINE OF ADOPTION IS A FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

Understanding that in our salvation we are adopted into God's family and enjoy a Father-child relationship with God is foundational for Christian living. Perhaps the strongest passage in Scripture dealing with the doctrine of adoption is found in Romans 8:14-16: "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba, Father!' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." This passage affirms the idea that, in our salvation, we are adopted into God's family as an act of his grace. It also affirms that the believer enjoys a close filial relationship with God as his Father. The Aramaic, "Abba" is a term of close relationship. This passage also mentions an important application of the doctrine of adoption, the fact that we are not given "a spirit of slavery leading to fear again." The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes the glory of our

salvation in this regard: "The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind" (20.1). Dr. David Jones comments on this: "'Slavish fear' refers to conformity to the moral law motivated by the threat of punishment. But this is not what the Bible means by obedience. As Augustine observed, 'if the commandment be done through fear of penalty and not through love of righteousness, it is done in the temper of servitude not freedom - and therefore it is not done at all.' A 'child-like love,' on the other hand, is motivated by the thought of pleasing one's heavenly Father and so yields the true obedience of a willing mind. The glory of the gospel is that it creates such motivation, though not without internal struggle as the apostle Paul himself attests (Rom. 7:21-25)" ("Christian Freedom," In Covenant Magazine, August & September, 1998, p. 9).

1 John 3:1-3 summarizes some important truths about adoption and its relationship to Christian living: "See how great a love

the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." John speaks of the tremendous love of God that is demonstrated in our being adopted into his family. He also sets forth the idea that the ultimate consummation of our salvation is the full realization of being a child of God. Finally, John says that the sure expectation of this full realization of being a child of God is a crucial motivating factor in Christian living. We fight against sin and apply ourselves in the things of God because of this sure hope set before us. We are motivated by what God has done and the promise of what he will do.

J. I. Packer argues that the entire Christian life should be understood in terms of adoption. He writes: "Sonship must be the controlling thought - the normative category, if you like - at every point. This follows from the nature of the case, and is strikingly confirmed by the fact that our Lord's teaching on Christian discipleship is cast in these terms" (Knowing God, p. 190). Dr. Packer carefully works his way through the Sermon on the Mount showing that the ethics and mandates for Christian living are presented in terms of a Father-child relationship. For example, Jesus said that we are to imitate our Father: "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. . . . Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:44,45, 48). Our way of life is to glorify our Father: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Jesus also preached that our actions are to please our Father (Matt. 6:1-18). Our giving, praying, and fasting are done to glorify and please God and not men. We are to trust God because, if we are redeemed, he is our Father: "Do not be anxious then, saying, 'What shall we eat? or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we clothe ourselves?' For all these things the

Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matt. 6:31,32) (See: Knowing God, p. 190-193). What motivates you in your Christian life? Are you motivated by fear of punishment or by wanting to glorify, imitate, and please the God who is your spiritual Father? Do you think of your relationship with God in terms of a Father-child relationship? Do you revel in what God has done as the Apostle John did in 1 John 3:1,2 and let that be your motivation as John mentions in 1 John 3:3?

Charles Wesley came to Christ on Whit Sunday, 1738. He wrote a hymn expressing his wonder at the grace he had received. It captures the heart of the mercy manifested in our adoption into God's family:

"Where shall my wondering soul begin?/
How shall I all to heaven aspire?/
A slave redeemed from death and sin,
A brand plucked from eternal fire,
How shall I equal triumphs raise,
Or sing my great Deliverer's praise?

O How shall I the goodness tell/
Father, which thou to me has showed?/
That I, a child or wrath and hell,
I should be called a child of God,
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,
Blest with this antepast of heaven!" (Methodist Hymnbook #361)

Suggested materials on the doctrine of adoption: Knowing God by J. I. Packer; Truths That Transform by D. James Kennedy; Redemption: Accomplished and Applied by John Murray and The Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 2.