

Systematic Theology II: Adoption

Last week, Pastor Michael went over the doctrine of justification. The theologian J.I. Packer refers to justification as the primary and fundamental blessing of the gospel. This morning we turn our attention to the reality of adoption, which Packer refers to as the highest blessing or privilege of the gospel. We will get into the distinction between these two doctrines later, but for now its enough to know that what we are talking about today is vastly important. Let me begin by reading a segment from the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith; chapter 12. This is what our church believes regarding adoption:

“All those that are justified, God vouchsafed, in and for the sake of 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.”

What a privilege! We have so much to give thanks for, and my desire is that this lesson would help us treasure the reality of our adoption and to live in light of it. Let's ask the Father for His help in mining the depths regarding our adoption.

I. A New Relationship: Children of God

There are many ways we could describe a Christian. We could say that a Christian is one whose sins have been forgiven. That would be a common answer (and definitely not

wrong!) He is one who has passed from death to life. He is one who is filled with the Holy Spirit. He is one who believes some fundamental truths – the atoning work of Christ, the resurrection, the trinity (pretty much everything we’re teaching in systematic theology). He is one who has Jesus as Savior. All of these are true! However, perhaps one of the simplest and yet most profound answers would be: “A Christian is one who has God as Father.” That answer should lead us to ask a question:

a. Who are God’s Children?

It is a commonly held idea that everyone in the world is God’s child. This is often said to emphasize the love and care we should show each other as “fellow children of God”, in the realm of human rights. While the concern to value human life is commendable; basing it in the thought that everyone is God’s child is not biblical and not helpful.

- First, it is not biblical because the Bible clearly says that people are made to be children of God upon receiving Christ (**John 1:12-13**):

“But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

This is not an automatic, universal status that we receive simply by being born.

Instead, the Bible bases human dignity in being created in the image of God. This is the reason that every life is important. Whether someone is a believer or not, every life has value because of the image of God in the person, even if it is greatly marred. So, every person is God’s creation, but not everyone is God’s child.

- Second, calling everyone God's child is not helpful because it devalues the amazing work that God has done in Christ to reconcile people to Himself and make them His children. This is a stunning display from the God of the Universe towards wretched sinners. It is a gift of grace that we should stand in awe of God for. By nature we are children of wrath, but by placing our faith in Christ, we are delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of heaven (Colossians 1). We are adopted into a new family and status. J.I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God*, I think sums it up best by saying:

“The gift of sonship to God becomes ours not through being born, but through being born again.”

We want to highlight the grandeur of this supernatural adoption as much as we can. So, calling everyone a child of God undermines the goal of glorifying God. We wholeheartedly acknowledge that God adopts us as His children on the basis of our union with Christ through faith.

b. What Is It Like To Be God's Child?

Now that we have established *who* God's children are, we want to now consider *what* being a child of God means or looks like. To be a child of God signals *a new relationship*. God had a covenant people, Israel, in the OT. They alone could call God Father. And even then it was still a matter of the heart as to who really belonged to God. In the NT, this wondrous reality of covenant relationship was extended to all those who, by grace alone, would come to God through faith alone in Christ alone.

We see this illustrated clearly in Ephesians 2. In verses 1-10 we are given the glorious picture of what happens to every person who is born again. “Dead in trespasses and sins”, “following the course of this world”, “by nature children of wrath.” But God! “because of His great love made us alive together with Christ”, “raised us up with him, and seated us with him in heavenly places”, “showing immeasurable grace and kindness towards us.” And all this is “by grace through faith. Not of our own doing, but the gift of God; apart from works so that He gets all the glory.” Amazing! There are so many things we could say about that passage, but all we want to do today is use that context to show how one is made eligible for adoption and to lead us further into Ephesians 2. So let's dive further down. Skip down to verse 12:

“remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2:12-13)

All non-Jews were once excluded from the covenant promises of God. But a new reality, under the banner of Christ, is that all people who have been made alive by grace are brought near – Jews and Gentiles.

And what does that new status look like for us? What does it mean to be brought near?

Look with me at verse 18:

“For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” (Ephesians 2:18-19)

To be brought near to God is to have Him as Father. It is to be a citizen of the kingdom and a child in the house of God. Our new relationship is that we can come to God as we would come to our earthly father.

Now, that last statement doesn't hit everyone the same way.

Some people have a great relationship with their father, they feel like they can tell him anything and they just enjoy his company. To these, they have a concept of the great blessing it is to have God as Father. It is like their experience with their own father, and yet multiplied many times over. They happily approach the Lord with all their needs and enjoy being with Him in prayer.

Others have an okay relationship with their father, but maybe they just don't feel like they can talk to their father about everything. Maybe he doesn't always tend to listen well, or he doesn't understand them well. To these, God is shown to be the Father who is perfect. He excels in all the areas where their earthly father fails. They can come to Him with every worry and fear, He always listens and has something to say. He perfectly understands them.

Still others have a very poor relationship with their father. They may be deeply estranged. Not only is there apathy in the relationship, but bitterness and resentment. It is a sad reality that there are fathers who disappoint in being present, showing affection, or displaying wisdom. To these, God is the Father they feel they never had. He will never fail them, or abandon them, or lead them astray. In Him, they find perfect security, omnipresence, love, and infinite wisdom.

And so whether our earthly father is a great, mediocre, or poor example – we can all find great appreciation for what it means for God to be our Father and us His adopted children.

Perhaps there is no clearer example of the character of the Fatherhood of God than in the life of Jesus. Jesus lived for His Father, and constantly mentioned Him while on earth. There are four things that we can glean from the relationship between Jesus and the Father, that we can also apply to our relationship to God as our Father. This reveals “what it is like to be God’s child.”

1. Authority – the Father had a specific purpose and will for His Son. Jesus lived out obedience to His Father’s will. **John 6:38** Jesus says:

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.”

And **John 5:19** clarifies that one who sent him as being the Father:

“Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”

2. Affection – in the next verse over, **John 5:20**

“For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.”

3. Fellowship – in **John 16:32** Jesus predicts the disciples’ scattering and says:

“the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to His own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.”

Jesus counted on the unbroken fellowship with the Father.

4. Honor – in **John 17:1** Jesus prays:

“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.”

These four aspects (authority, affection, fellowship, and honor) all likewise are true of the Father’s relationship with every believer. We are under God’s rule – tasked to follow His will, to obey his commands. We are shown great love, and have His fellowship. He does not abandon us even if all others do. And he honors all those who serve Him (John 12:26).

This all gives us an idea of what it looks like to be a child of God – to have God as our Father.

II. The Highest Privilege: Slave to Son

As we opened this morning I mentioned that J.I. Packer referred to divine adoption as the highest privilege of the gospel. Evangelicals rightly place a great deal of emphasis on justification – we spend the majority of our time marveling at this great reality. This is the primary and fundamental blessing of the gospel because it meets our greatest and most fundamental need.

By nature we exist under the wrath of God, born under sin and enslaved to it. We have broken God’s Law and should expect His righteous judgment against us in our sin. We are unable to change our state – because we are entirely unwilling and disinclined to

submit our lives to God on our own. We are enslaved to our own sin. And even if we were willing, we do not have the righteousness within ourselves to commend us to God. We are burdened with guilt, condemned, estranged, and hopeless in ourselves. And so the first and primary ray of hope the gospel offers us is forgiveness of sins and acceptance before God the Judge. Every other blessing of the gospel flows from this.

Adoption is one such blessing that flows from justification. And our argument is that it is a higher blessing, because it provides us with a deeper relationship with God. Packer says that:

“Justification is a forensic idea, conceived in terms of law, and viewing God as judge.”

God declares justified sinners as forgiven and innocent; never to be judged for their sins, because of the perfect and sufficient death and payment of the penalty by their Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are pardoned, but at that point have no fellowship with God. We are simply released from charges.

Packer goes on to describe adoption by saying:

“Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as Father.”

In adoption, we are taken from being a cleared criminal to being brought into the family of the Supreme Judge. And here God is not only a Judge who dispenses justice while being unattached to our crimes. What I’m trying to say is that *our Divine Judge is the one we have outrageously offended and sinned against*. It is personal. And still, after we spurned His law, disregarded His will, and maybe laughed at Him and His people – He takes us in to His family and makes us sons and daughters! He showers His people with care, affection, and joy.

Packer again:

“To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is far greater.”

Listen to these wondrous words of Paul in **Galatians 4:4-7**

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”

If you are a Christian this morning, you have been justified. You have been cleared of all guilt on your record. You have been ransomed and redeemed. You were a slave to sin and you have been bought with the blood of Christ. You have been set free. But not only are you pardoned and emancipated, you have been adopted. You have been made a son or daughter, and have been made a co-heir with Christ, with all the privileges and responsibilities involved.

And I might add, being adopted as God’s children means we are adopted into a vast family composed of all his people. We have brothers and sisters built in. And so whenever someone comes to Christ there is great rejoicing. First, we rejoice in the glory of God. He gets glory – being seen as supremely worthy to be worshipped and followed. Second, a life has passed from death to life. We rejoice at the rescue. And third, we rejoice because through divine adoption, the family got bigger. We have a new sibling

that we get to love and enjoy life with. And so through divine adoption we are joined to God as Father and to one another as brothers and sisters.

This is surely a high high privilege.

III. What Our Adoption Reveals

With the time we have remaining I'd like for us to look at three things which the truth of our adoption reveals to us.

1. The Greatness of God's Love

As we looked at justification and adoption, we were looking at two expressions of God's *love* towards sinners.

- First, God shows His love towards us at the cross. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." And **1 John 4:10**

"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

- Second, God shows his love towards us in adoption. We see this expressed in **1 John 3:1**

"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."

I grew up reading from the *New International Version* and so this verse is etched in my brain as "*see what great love the Father has lavished on us.*" I love that picture. The Father has generously, without holding back, given His very best – showering us with the love that He has for His only begotten Son. A familial love.

And the amazing character of this love is the fact that we did nothing to earn it. In fact we did everything to earn the exact opposite of favor and love. We have no business being in God's family on our own merit and record. It is entirely a gift of free grace. Extravagant love.

Think of how adoption works for a second. A child does not go out, find himself suitable parents and then get himself adopted. No, the child is the passive party. The parents are the ones who initiate the process. They are the ones who seek out a child to adopt, who freely choose a child to bring into their family. This doesn't come through coercion but out of the desire of the parent's hearts. In the same way, God is under no obligation to adopt sinners into His family. He would have been perfectly right and just to have punished our sins by condemning us forever to Hell. And yet, in love, He freely and graciously forgives us, redeems us through Christ and initiates our adoption. He is the active party, acting in great love.

And it doesn't stop there! He initiates our adoption and becomes our Father. But then, as a good Father, He also nurtures us – continuing to show us love throughout our life.

Good human parents aren't content simply with having a legal document that says the child now belongs to them. They endeavor to establish a healthy relationship and bond with their new son or daughter. They show them kindness and affection – which produces affection in the child's heart for his/her new parents. In the same way, God is not content to simply call us His children as a formality. To be God's child is to be loved. To be really and truly loved. He will show us more and more of His love throughout eternity and spark more and more love in our hearts toward Him through it. Packer says:

“The prospect before the adopted children of God is an eternity of love.”

2. The Glory of the Christian Hope

The doctrine of adoption can help us in how we think of our “glorious hope.”

- First, we can be assured that our glorious hope will come to pass when we think of it as our promised inheritance. As God’s children we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. We are guaranteed all that God has in store for us.
- Second, divine adoption shows us that the substance of that inheritance is to share in the glory of Christ. According to 1 John 3 (in the context of being God’s children) when He appears we will be like him “for we will see him as he is.” This glorification will affect our whole being – mind and body. **Romans 8:23** speaks of the physical aspect:

“we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

It is not that we are eagerly waiting to be adopted in the future. For all believers our adoption was enacted at conversion. However, the full inheritance due to us as adopted sons and daughters will not be fully realized and received until that future glorious day. And on that day we will join the experience of our glorious Elder Brother. It is stunning to think that everything that Jesus has will someday be ours as well – the inheritance He secured.

- Third, our adoption shows us that the glorious hope of heaven will be a family gathering. Jesus prays for this in the High Priestly Prayer saying:

“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” (John 17:4)

To be in heaven is to be in the presence of God your Father, and Jesus, your Savior yes, but also your Brother. And to be surrounded by your brothers and sisters from throughout the ages, from every corner of the globe. And the time (eternity) will be marked by love. It is the largest ever family reunion! What joy there is before us – our glorious hope!

3. The Motivation for Gospel Holiness

By “gospel holiness” what I actually mean is just plain holiness – that term is just to distinguish it from a misguided legalistic holiness. Gospel holiness comes from love for God from the heart, while legalistic holiness is mere exterior routines and outward behavior from self-interested motives.

The doctrine of adoption reveals:

- First, that gospel holiness is simply living out the life of an obedient son or daughter under the guardianship of a loving Father.
- Second, the adoptive relationship itself provides the motive for authentic gospel-centered holy living. In Ephesians 1 we read of the eternal plan of God to “predestine us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.” And part of that predestining will is that “we should be holy and blameless before him (v.3).” Because we know this is our Father’s will and want to please Him, we are motivated to live in holiness. And it results in

our own happiness as well – as the relationship between us and the Father remains strong.

Now, there will be times when we wander, as children tend to do, and the Father has to discipline us to bring us back. In all His discipline He is fashioning us further into the family likeness, fitting us for heaven. We can take comfort in the words from Hebrews 12:

“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” (Hebrews 12:6)

To be disciplined is to be accepted and cared for, and to be spurred towards holiness. Having this knowledge is a great comfort when we are going through trials in our lives. If we are children of our Heavenly Father then his purposes are always for our good. And we can maintain assurance that we belong to Him even through the darkest seasons, because we know that the trial is not punishment but purposeful love.

So through the very real hard experiences we face in life we should remember that our primary motive for holiness is not to avoid punishment (be good so that God doesn't strike us down), but rather from a desire to show love and gratitude to our Father by seeking to align our lives with His will for us.

IV. Conclusion

As we come to a close, I hope you have been stirred to gratitude for what God has done in adoption. This great reality is something to cherish, but not only as a doctrine “out there.” This is not just a paragraph in a confession or creed. This truth of our adoption is to be our living experience and confidence every day of our lives.

So to recap: We have a new identity – children of God! We experience God’s fatherhood through His authority, affection, fellowship, and honor. We are given the high privilege of being transferred from a slave to free and pardoned. But not just that, we are adopted as a son or daughter in the family of God. Lastly we looked at what our adoption reveals. Three things. The greatness of God’s love, the glory of our Christian hope, and the motivation for gospel holiness.

What a security we have knowing that we belong to God. He is the perfect Father who will never abandon us His adopted children.