

God's Great News for Humanity's Great Problem
Paul's Letter to the Romans

The Christian's Identity: Adopted by the Spirit into God's Family
Romans 8:12 – 17

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Exegetical Outline

- ¹² So then, brethren, we are under obligation,
not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—
¹³ for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die;
but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
¹⁴ For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.
¹⁵ For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again,
but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'
¹⁶ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God,
¹⁷ and if children, heirs also,
heirs of God and
fellow heirs with Christ,
if indeed we suffer with Him
so that we may also be glorified with Him.

Introduction: Remember Who You Are

Tonight, we're continuing our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. To illustrate what we're going to look into, I'd like to show you a clip of *The Lion King*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIMbzKbDge4&feature=related>

Relevance

I love that clip, because while there are differences, the similarities to the Christian life are striking: (1) like Simba, we often run away from our problems and our calling and our responsibilities, even blaming God and ourselves for how the world sucks; (2) we often turn to a hedonistic lifestyle where our motto becomes *hakuna matata*, sometimes bad things happen and there's nothing you can do about it, or when the world turns its back on you, you stick your head in your past; (3) when we deny our true selves, we also deny our God and Father; (4) embracing our true identity in Christ is also embracing the character of our Father and allowing Him to pour out His life and character through us; and most importantly, (5) we need to remember who we are, our identity, first that we were created to bear the image of God, and then that we were redeemed by Jesus to bear the renewed image of God placed in us by the Spirit of Jesus himself.

Context

We are in Paul's letter to the Romans, and we are studying how God has created a new kind of humanity, first in the person of Jesus, and then by anyone who comes to Jesus by faith. This is the main theme in this section of Romans 8, verses 12 – 17. Verse 12 begins, 'So then.' This is a direct application of what we learned in Romans 8:5 – 11. What did we learn then? That the Spirit of God lives in any one of us who give our lives to Jesus. He gives his life to us, and the life that is in him, that is his Spirit. Jesus therefore establishes a bond between himself and us. The Spirit is the key to our identity and definition as Christians. We have to remember who the Spirit of Jesus makes us. We are God's new humanity, and we must remember that.

Here is the stunning conclusion to the powerful series of metaphors Paul has been using to teach us about our identity. First, in Romans 6:1 – 11, we learned about how we were baptized into Christ, dying with him at his Cross and living with him anew in his Resurrection. Second, in Romans 6:15 – 23, we learned about how we are bondslaves to Christ, bought out of another bondslavery, a bondslavery to sin, so that we may serve him wholeheartedly. Third, in Romans 7:1 – 6, we learned that we are married to Christ, in his Cross and in his Resurrection to be free from the Law. Finally, here in Romans 8:12 – 17, we are adopted by God and fully his children. Look at how Paul uses the verb of being 'WE ARE' to explicitly describe our identity: WE ARE CHILDREN OF GOD. So let's dive in!!

The Spirit is the Key to Defeating the Flesh: v.12 – 13

Verses 12-13 describe the struggle of the Christian with the sin nature that is still part of us, except this time, we are told how to win. '12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – 13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.' Once again, let's define our terms. The flesh is not simply our physical bodies; it's our tarnished human nature, which involves both our physical and spiritual nature. It's our self-effort apart from God, the old self-sufficient way of life we lived before the Spirit of Christ came into us. Remember back in 7:21, what is in us? Paul said that 'evil is present in me.' The evil that he spoke of is the flesh. It carries our old memories, old desires, old assumptions, old fears, and old addictions into our new life as Christians.

We DO NOT GO BACK to our old way of life of LIVING IN A SELF-CENTERED WAY. This is very important especially for you, because the world is sinking further and further into recession. The economy continues to fall. Because your parents will get hit by the financial crisis, I expect that a few of you will not be able to return to BC in the fall. You will feel the fear. But there is more. Next year, with stress higher and money tighter, getting drunk will become more of a problem. Will we who know Jesus care for people, or will we drown our stresses in the drink, too? But there's more. People's ideologies have collapsed. On October 23, 2008, banking wizard Alan Greenspan said that he was wrong: the free market does not correct itself. For many people, that admission was the sign of doom. Suddenly, gone was the clever rationalization for greed that all of us had; it is simply not true that if we act in our own best interest, that the best interest of society as a whole will emerge. Now we must find a new anchor for limiting our self-centeredness, and directing us outward towards others in love, but where do we find that anchor? In the postmodern sea of moral relativism, there does not appear to be any good material out of which we

can build an anchor. There is no basis for calling people to sacrifice for one another. Meanwhile, it remains to be seen whether the Church in the U.S., which has a basis for calling people to that, will do so. Will we share the love of Jesus with the world, or will we be like FEMA during Hurricane Katrina? In times of disaster, we are supposed to serve others. We are supposed to be at parties sober and attentive to others. We are also supposed to set up alternative ways of having fun and being generous. But so often, we just wind up serving ourselves.

Illus: How does that work out for you? One way in which this happened for me is by my busyness. Most of my life has been built on being able to do many things well at once. I don't remember when it started, but by the time I was in sixth grade, I knew I wanted to be a good little student, a swimmer, an oil painter, a piano-player, and I knew that my ability to do all these things was the feather in my cap! My natural tendency was to spread myself out and try new things or sign up for too much. But it was a way of life built on the assumption that God's love wasn't enough, so I had to go out and earn everyone else's respect. Now when I became a Christian, I still tried to do a lot of things on my own because that was the way I had always thought and lived. But things had to change, because a life with Jesus is not just adding a few things to your already packed schedule. It is complete change in priorities and power.

Verse 13: 'For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die.' Literally, the Greek reads, 'you are destined to die.' Now when I read that, I thought, 'Wow! That sounds vindictive! But that is not a vindictive statement. It's an ontological truth. God is life. To live apart from Him is to have less and less life, which is more and more death. Death is not just a chemical process in the body, it is a spiritual and emotional breakdown that can happen to us NOW.

Inside us, there is a conversation like the one Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* has inside himself. It was between Gollum and Smeagol, the two sides of his nature: 'You see. I told you. Master broke his promise. Master is tricky. Master doesn't care about us.' That's fairly apt. The Gollum side of us says, 'No one else cares about you. No one else is for you.' So if your old habit is to live for success because hey, if respect isn't freely given, it must be bought, then you continue dying in your performance-orientedness. Or maybe you protect yourself from other people because you're afraid of getting hurt and therefore you close the door, and you don't let anyone in, so you continue dying in your isolation. Whatever the case may be for you, the flesh will try to reinforce its self-centeredness by saying, 'You see, no one is there to help you. You've got to look out for number one, and let ME do it. Gollum. Gollum.'

But we have to remember who we are. Specifically, how are we to do this? The answer again is THE HOLY SPIRIT. Why is the Spirit the key to putting our flesh to death? First of all, because the Spirit is HOLY. He is passionate about Jesus' holy character being revealed in those who believe. That means he is totally opposed to sin. Second, because the Spirit desires to reveal Christ. The Spirit was concentrated in Jesus, sustained Jesus, and was stamped by Jesus as his own. That means he is totally opposed to human self-glorification because that does not reveal Christ. Third, because the Spirit wants us to be intimate with Jesus in every aspect of life. That means he does not want us living on our own. The key lesson here is WE NEED JESUS' SPIRIT to live for Jesus and with Jesus. Whether we struggle with greed, sexual sin, anger, gossip, judgmentalism, or some other form of self-centeredness, let's take our focus off ourselves. Let's get in step with the Spirit and ask him for help.

The Spirit is the Spirit of Our Adoption as Sons: v.14 – 16

Why is the Spirit the key here? Because the Spirit is the Spirit of our adoption. Check out verse 14 – 17: 'For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. 15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!' 16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God,'¹ Right away, I want to address the concern some

¹ In the ancient world, when you were called a 'son of' something, that means you embodied that something. Thus, an early Christian named Joseph was called Barnabus because he was the Son of Encouragement. He embodied that character of being encouraging, motivating. So here, Paul says that as we are led by the Spirit of God, God demonstrates his character through us so that we can rightly be called 'sons of God.' Notice that Paul says that the Spirit is 'of God' as opposed to 'of Christ' like he said in v.9. This symmetry is perfect, because of course, it takes the Spirit of God to shine forth the character of God through us. This was true for the ultimate Son of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus always was led the Spirit of God, through the wilderness, into his relationships, and finally to the Cross. In John 5:19, Jesus pointed out his utter dependence: 'The Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.' And in John 12:49, 'I did not speak on my own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent me has given me commandment, what to say, and what to speak.' So for us, in the most practical terms, being a 'son of God' translates into a total and continual dependence on the Spirit of God. Now we might have our qualms about being 'followers' because we want to be 'leaders,' but if Jesus lived as a follower of the Spirit in this way, how can we live any differently? Are we better than him??? This same Spirit will be in us, leading us through temptations,

of you women might have. Why is this ‘sons’ and not ‘daughters?’ Is Paul sexist? I don’t think so. The reason why Paul uses the term ‘sons’ here and not ‘daughters’ is because he is referring specifically to both the Roman and Jewish background to adoption. As we read in the very next verse, this issue of being ‘sons’ is important: ‘You have received a Spirit of adoption as sons.’

Let’s first understand Roman adoption.² Roman adoption was always done for an adult son. The adopting father would usually want to make another young man an heir in his house. So that adopting father would go through three main steps. Distilling all of William Barclay’s research on adoption leads me to the following. ‘In Roman society, the father had ultimate authority in his household. This was called the ‘*patria potestas*,’ the absolute ownership of the father, extending even to life and death. Adoption in Roman society was incredibly serious, then, because the son had to pass out of the *patria potestas* of the natural father, and into the *patria potestas* of the adopting father. There were three steps. The first was known as ‘*mancipatio*.’ The adopting father approaches the natural father with seven witnesses. He brings a scale and weights and tries to purchase the son from the old family. He goes through this symbolic procedure three times. The natural father refuses the first time. They do this a second time. Then on the third time, the natural father agrees. Thus the ‘*patria potestas*’ of the natural father was held to be broken. After the sale there followed a ceremony called ‘*vindicatio*.’ The adopting father went to the ‘*praetor*,’ one of the Romans magistrates, and argued publicly his case for the adoption of this son. Then, third is the party, during which the adopting father publicly announces to all his friends and family that there is a new son and a new heir.

Roman history itself provides an outstanding case of this adoption. In the year 50 AD, the Emperor Claudius adopted a young man so that this young man would succeed him on the throne. That young man changed his name to Nero. In order to cement the alliance, Nero wanted to marry the natural daughter of Claudius, Octavia, who was then his legal sister. They were in no sense blood relations; yet in the eyes of the law, they were brother and sister; and before they could marry the Roman senate had to pass special legislation to enable Nero to marry a girl who was legally his own sister. That is how serious and life-changing this adoption was.

Now how do we apply this to ourselves today? Let me give a qualifier, that this picture is not for men only. The *cultural* picture was of the adoption of adult sons. Paul is therefore saying that God adopts men and women in a way similar to how a Roman father adopts a son to be his heir. Young men, you are adopted as a son into God’s family like a Roman father adopts an adult son. Young women, you are adopted as a daughter into God’s family like a Roman father adopts an adult son. So regardless of your gender or your age, this picture of Roman adoption applies to you if you have faith in Christ.

The Jewish idea of adoption flows out of God giving humanity an inheritance. God had given Adam, and by marriage, Eve, the inheritance of the garden land. Adam was the first human son of God. But since Adam and Eve turned away from God, they disinherited themselves. In response, God gathered Israel the nation and adopted Israel collectively – men, women, and children – as a ‘son’ (Ex.4:22, Rom.9:4), in order to give them the inheritance of a new garden land, the Promised Land. But Israel turned away from God, and in a sense disinherited themselves; they needed God to renew the covenant with them. Then, whenever a new king of Israel came to the throne, someone anointed him with oil and read Psalm 2 over him. That song said, ‘You are My son, today I have begotten you.’ His enthronement was considered the moment when God adopted him as a son. So Jesus came as the One and Only

leading us through our relationships, and leading us into sacrifice for others. Our lives will then become a living twin of our older brother, Jesus Christ, as he steps into this present age in newness, just as he first stepped into human history as a baby in Bethlehem. This is why Paul commanded us to ‘present yourselves to God’ in 6:13 and why he will say ‘present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice’ later in 12:1. Don’t waste your life living out of your fleshly self-effort.

² If you’re curious about how this looked, I encourage you to watch the movie *Ben Hur*. Charlton Heston plays Judah Ben Hur, the young Jewish galley slave who rescues the Roman Admiral Arius from drowning during a naval battle on the Mediterranean. The Romans won the battle, so Arius returns to Rome a hero. During his victory march through Rome to the throne of the Emperor Tiberias, Arius has Judah Ben Hur ride beside him on the victory chariot. Then, Arius appears before the entire Roman senate and the Emperor to plead the case that Ben Hur be released from being a slave and placed by adoption as an adult son into Arius’ family. The Emperor and the Senate acquiesce and next comes to huge gala celebration thrown by Arius. Into the main hall and courtyard in Arius’ enormous house come dancers, musicians, and guests: Arius’ friends and colleagues. In the middle of the party, Arius commands that the music stop, and he calls Judah Ben Hur forward. He tells the whole audience of his great joy at finding such a young man who rescued him at sea and then won the Roman chariot races in the Circus of Rome. He then tells the audience his reason for throwing this huge celebration in the first place: to recognize, honor, and publicly state his love for his adopted son, Young Arius. Ben Hur, or Young Arius, steps forward, and Arius puts his ancient family signet ring on his finger. From that moment onward, all of the father’s wealth, land, power, and honor belong to and will be inherited by Young Arius. Young Arius is publicly identified with his father by a powerful public statement of love.

True Son of God. And this is where it gets really cool. When Jesus began his public role in Israel, he marched off to the wilderness where his cousin John the Baptist was baptizing people – symbolically cleansing them – in the Jordan River. Jesus went under the water and when he came up, THAT’S when God anointed him with His Spirit as king. Then God said the words of Psalm 2 over him. ‘You are My Son’ – that’s Psalm 2! And by conquering the sin in his own fallen humanity, he united the Spirit of God in himself fully with humanity, remaking his own humanity in the process. So when we share Jesus’ Spirit, we share in his new humanity, and therefore we also share in his identity as the Son of God. We become sons and daughters of God because God connects us to Jesus, when we come to him. So, ‘We share by adoption what Jesus is by nature.’ That is the fundamental reality. You can say, ‘Jesus shared in our nature, that we might share in his nature.’

Implication #1: Publicly Declared Love

What are the implications of this? First, let’s dwell a bit on how PUBLIC this declaration of ADOPTION LOVE is.³ The father initiates the public break with the old family in the case of Roman adoption, or from Egypt in the case of Israel. So he publicly states his case in front of all concerned parties and authorities. And he then publicly declares his love and blessing at a huge party thrown for the express purpose of recognizing this new heir. How powerful this PUBLIC affirmation by our father can be! I know this because once my family and another family went to Lake Tahoe together to ski. We stayed at a cabin in the mountains. Now my sister was in second grade at the time, and this other family also had a daughter the same age. This other father let his daughter play on his lap, but my sister never had that kind of relationship with our father. Watching this public display of affection and love made an impact on my sister. Later that night, she came to our mom and asked, ‘How come I can’t play on Dad’s lap like that?’

Notice that our adoption is so monumental, it rules out any fear of future rejection. By way of comparison, Paul says that fear cannot possibly be a part of our experience. Look at the contrast Paul sets up in v.15: ‘For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons.’ The spirit of bondslavery is a reflection on the possible misunderstandings that could come about because Paul used the bondslavery metaphor in Romans 6:15 – 23. He does not want us to feel like we are bondslaves to God in the sense that we also become a bondslave to fear, fear of getting beaten and abused, fear of a cruel master whose ways cannot be trusted. This is decidedly NOT what our relationship with God is like. We are not slaves to Him in that sense. Paul just makes this contrast for the sake of emphasizing who the Holy Spirit is and who he is not. He does the same thing in 2 Timothy 1:7, ‘For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.’ We can be so confident that God will not send us away because He has gone so far to adopt us as to publicly declare His love for us at the Cross, and then to put His Spirit in us to publicly show forth His life pouring out through us.

Psychologically, fear of failure and rejection is a powerful motivator. The entire world motivates us by playing off our fears: our fear of our parents’ rejection (You’d better do well, or else!), our fear of not being attractive (I just have to look good!), our fear of always have to put forward a good image (Never let them see you sweat). Fear is a main ingredient in almost all human relationships. Not so with God. With Him, we have no such fear of rejection. Look at the word that ends Paul’s phrase in the beginning of v.15: ‘again.’ You have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear AGAIN. Your former life was based on fear. When will you get tired of living out of fear?!? Do you see how amazing this is? In spite of our ongoing struggle with sin, God is as pleased with us as an adopting father! As Paul argued in Romans 5:5 – 8, if God decided to adopt us at the Cross when we were at our ugliest, how much more does He love us now that He’s adopted us?

Furthermore, as Christians, it seems like fear is a regular part of our daily lives. We might have fears of being put down for our faith, fears about truly walking with God because it just seems so inefficient in our fast paced world.

³ This is what Gary Smalley and John Trent, authors of the significant book *The Blessing*, say about our desire for public, unconditional acceptance by our parents: ‘All of us long to be accepted by others. While we may say out loud, ‘I don’t care what other people think about me,’ on the inside we all yearn for intimacy and affection. This yearning is especially true in our relationship with our parents. Gaining or missing out on parental approval has a tremendous impact on us, even if it has been years since we had any regular contact with them. In fact, what happens in our relationship with our parents can greatly affect all our present and future relationships.’ How meaningful a blessing, a statement of public love is! This resonates deeply with God being the ultimate Father. Perhaps some of you long for that kind of love. The ADOPTING LOVE OF GOD can only be found with God. He publicly initiated a relationship with us at the Cross, for that was His public demonstration of love. And then He publicly declares us to be a part of His family by giving His Spirit to us. The indwelling Spirit is like the ancestral signet ring that we can bear proudly, because the Spirit is God’s great signature on our hearts guaranteeing us our identity and inheritance in God’s royal family.

Yet Paul says here that fear is the exact opposite of walking by the Spirit. We can let go of these fears because we are God's adopted sons and daughters.

Implication #2: Intimate Love

Now another privilege that Paul highlights in this section is the intimacy that we have with God. This adoption lets us call God the most familial and endearing terms in the Jewish vocabulary: 'Abba,' the Jewish word young children would call their fathers. Literally, it means 'Daddy.' Look at the end of verse 15. 'but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!''⁴

Illus: My wife and I have a friend who adopted a girl from China. As a single white mom, that hasn't been easy. But we are so amazed by her, because her adopted Chinese daughter is doing so well.

Just to give us more reason not to fear is verse 16: 'The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.' Remember the seven witnesses that accompanied a Roman father to adopt a son? Those witnesses were there so that in case the father died, the witnesses would attest to the adoption and say, 'Yes, I saw it.' So the Spirit in us is the one who reassures us all the time, 'Yes, you are safely adopted. Make no mistake about it.'

Illus: There was a moment when this came home powerfully for me. In 1995, there was one weekend where a lot of things collided. I had just moved into an inner city neighborhood for the first time, and I was asking a lot of questions, like, 'What am I doing here?' As an Asian-American among Mexican immigrant families, I felt very out of place. Also, some friends from college didn't want to come over; they were afraid their cars would be broken into, so I felt out of place with them. I was struggling with being in the working world, feeling out of place there, too. My parents had recently got their divorce, so I felt forgotten and damaged in some ways. And over this one weekend, I had told this girl that I liked her, but she told me she didn't see us as more than friends. So that Monday, I just couldn't do anything. I went to go sit in my car at lunch. I just cried. Then I heard God whisper, 'I'm proud of you.' I listened for more, because I was expecting a stern voice to say, 'But you have a lot to learn' or something like that. I said to God, 'So where's the but?' And what was amazing was that there was no but. Sure, I had (and have) things to learn, but that didn't change God being proud of me. God doesn't give backhanded compliments. 'I'm proud of you.' Period.

Application:

Implication #3: New Identity

The father purchases the son out of the previous family, making a permanent and irrevocable legal break with the old family. The old life was totally cancelled out. All debts were cancelled. You got a new identity. This is truly newness of life.

Implication #4: New Inheritance

The adopted son was accepted as a full-fledged heir, guaranteed, regardless of blood line or whether there were any other sons. The new son was a son permanently and totally. There was no way to break the tie between the adopting father and the new son (except possibly through another adoption agreed to by the new father, which is ridiculous to imagine!).

Now this identification with Christ is strong, and because we share everything with him, we share his sufferings. 'If indeed we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.' There is an iron linkage drawn between Christ's sufferings and ours. This is a precursor to our study of Romans 8:18-25. But if we share in the eternal love God has for Christ, and we share in the future inheritance God has for Christ, then we also share in the difficulties Jesus had as he walked this earth. There is no avoiding it, for it is a package deal once the Spirit lives in us.

Implication #5: New Character

⁴ I admit that it's difficult for me to illustrate precisely what this term Abba means. We have glimpses in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*. When Reuven is in the hospital after being cut by glass, he asks his father, 'Abba, please tell me what's the matter...' (p.49) Later, when Reuven is confused about his friend Danny, he goes to his father, and uses the word 'Abba.' In the most intimate of conversations, Reuven calls his father 'Abba,' a word of rich intimacy.

The new son will assume the responsibilities of his new position in his new family, as befits his station and his honored sonship.

Now that concludes our study of this marvelous section. The indwelling Spirit is the key to overcoming the flesh and being victorious in our internal civil war with sin. The Spirit is the key to being led by God. The Spirit is the key to our adoption into God's royal family. The Spirit is the experiential aspect of God's public declaration of love for us. The Spirit is the key to our victory over fear. The Spirit is the key to having a witness that reassures of our inheritance. The Spirit is the key to our identity.

I'm also struck by the seriousness of the phrase in v.13, 'if by the Spirit you are putting to death.' Just cut it off! In our society, we have the tendency to coddle our sin, defend it, and let it grow like bacteria in a petri dish so long as other people never catch on or smell the odor. For example, we are soft on materialism, soft on reconciliation between family members, and soft on reconciliation between people of different races and classes. Or maybe you are soft on lust or gossip, thinking, 'It's just a little bit...no one will notice.' Here is our commission to be absolutely ruthless with our sin by turning over the reins to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will have no mercy with the flesh. He'll whip out his razor sharp scalpel and cut off the sin every time it grows, if you allow him. He takes no prisoners. The consequence is that we will live.

To close, I want to read a poem that I love that encapsulates this section very well. I'm not sure who wrote it, but I think it's Amy Carmichael.

Oh the bitter shame and sorrow that a time could ever be.
When I let the Savior's pity plead in vain and proudly answered
All of self and none of Thee
Yet He found me, I beheld Him bleeding on the accursed tree
I heard Him pray, 'Forgive them Father,' and my wistful heart said faintly,
Some of self and some of Thee
Day by day His tender mercy, healing, helping, full and free
Sweet and strong, and oh, so patient, brought me lower while I whispered
Less of self and more of Thee
Higher than the highest heavens, deeper than the deepest sea
Lord, Thy love at last has conquered. Grant me now my supplication,
None of self and all of Thee