

If Children, then Heirs

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 9, 2022.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Rom. 8:12–17).¹

While we may have a tendency to overcomplicate it, the gospel is quite simple. As the Apostle Paul articulates it in the fifth chapter of Romans, “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:1). Quite simple indeed. But, as simple as it is, what flows from it is multiplicitous.

For example, in the eighth chapter of Romans alone we learn that because we are “justified by faith” and at “peace with God,” there is now “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). We who, in our sinful flesh, were once lawbreakers now stand before God in Christ’s righteousness. The righteous requirement of God’s law which once condemned us is now fulfilled in Christ (Rom. 8:4).

Not only has our legal standing changed but our nature too. We who were once characterized by our flesh now live according to the Spirit of Christ, who dwells, within not some but, all who believe, an eternal life and death distinction. As Paul explains, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (8:9b-10).

“So then,” Paul reckons, “we are under obligation” (8:12 NET), or literally “debtors,” to live our lives according to, by, and through the Holy Spirit. We who have been saved by grace are to live holy lives of gratitude to God, who enables us to do just that through his sanctifying presence within us. This involves denying the arrogant presumption of any contribution to our justification while simultaneously actively engaging in our sanctification. As such, as debtors to grace the holiness of our lives reflects a gospel-centered gratitude. As we sing,

O to grace how great a debtor
daily I’m constrained to be;
let that grace now, like a fetter,
bind my wand’ring heart to thee.
Prone to wander—Lord I feel it
—prone to leave the God I love:
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it,

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

seal it for thy courts above.²

And indeed he has, sealing us with the Holy Spirit, the guarantee of our inheritance in heaven (Eph. 1:13-14).

Yet, to say that the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance implies that we *have* a heavenly inheritance, which seems unthinkable for sinners saved by grace alone. If in the courtroom of God's justice we are justified as righteous only for the imputed righteousness of Christ, then it would seem that we would arrive at the gates of heaven as second class citizens at best, or even classless servants, redeemed to meet the needs of the heavenly realm. But this is not the case. For, all who are justified so also are adopted, legal children of God, and heirs with Christ.

Adopted

Spiritually speaking, the concept of adoption may be foreign to you. After all, what need is there of adoption if we are all God's children? It's a fair question, and yes in a sense we are, as we all are created by God and bear his image: "in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). But in a legal and relational sense, no.

Only those who are born again through faith in Christ are children of God. All others are "sons of disobedience" and "by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). Or, as Jesus put it to the most religious men of his day, "You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44). Adoption then is necessary, as there is only one legitimate Son of God, through whom we are adopted as children of God.

In reality this was God's plan for us all along. As Paul explains to the Ephesians,

[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him in love. He did this by predestining us to adoption as his legal heirs through Jesus Christ, according to the pleasure of his will—to the praise of the glory of his grace that he has freely bestowed on us in his dearly loved Son (Eph. 1:4-6 NET).

Through faith in Christ then we are truly and eternally children of God (Gal. 3:26), heirs with Christ as such, and guaranteed this through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, whom we received upon our adoption (Rom.8:15).

And it is by virtue of his presence that we live as who we truly and eternally are, not "following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2), nor with a "spirit of slavery leading again to fear" of condemnation but by "the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, 'Abba Father'" (8:15 NET).

² "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 457.

Borrowing from Jesus' personal prayer in Aramaic, it is a cry of relationship, telling of our access to our Father in heaven. Just as Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven so may we. Praying as a child not in fear of retribution but confident of loving acceptance.

Confirmed

It is the Holy Spirit himself who “bears witness with (or “to” NET) our spirit that we are children of God” (8:16). No Christian should worry if he or she is a child of God. The Holy Spirit's presence confirms it. As one commentator puts it, “The Holy Spirit is not only instrumental in *making* us God's children; he also makes us *aware* that we are God's children.”³ How he does this is quite evident.

For example, the Holy Spirit reveals his presence through leading us to a right confession, such as crying out *not* to an unknown god but, “Abba! Father!” through Jesus Christ the Son. As the Apostle John makes clear, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 John 4:15). And as Paul articulates in the tenth chapter of Romans, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:9-10). And it is the Holy Spirit who leads us, indeed enables us, to do this very thing.

The Holy Spirit also reveals his presence in leading us to see sin for what it is, convicting us of it, and enabling us to put it to death: For, “if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (8:13b-14). To the Corinthians, Paul describes this conviction as “godly grief” leading to repentance (2 Cor. 7:9). The Holy Spirit also enables this turning from sin, leading us not to coddle nor keep but to “mortify the deeds of the body” (8:13 KJV).

However, there is one very important way the Holy Spirit reveals his presence that is often overlooked: He reveals himself in our suffering. It is in our daily struggles, our losses, even our anxieties, and certainly our persecutions, but so much more that the Holy Spirit uses to conform us to the image of Christ. In his own life, Paul describes such sanctifying suffering as “the anguish of childbirth” (Gal. 4:19) notably in his zeal that Christ be “formed” in us, a verb meaning “to shape, to figure, or even to draw a sketch.”⁴ Through the suffering of this life the Holy Spirit is creating in us the masterpiece of Christlikeness and preparing us for glory to come, and as we see this conforming work in us, we are witnessing the evidence of the Holy Spirit within us. And the glory to come includes our inheritance.

Endowed

It is a simple deduction: If we are children of God, then we are “heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (8:17a). This endowment of our adoption awaits us. Though we are already

³ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 487.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, “Christianity and Literature” quoted in Jerram Barrs, *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 24.

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rightful children and legal heirs, we have not yet received our inheritance. It awaits us, as it has every child of God since God's promise to Abraham. As Christ is the seed of Abraham and heir to everything promised, so also are we in Christ (Gal. 3:16-18, 29).

Of course, we live in the here and now, and our culture has taught us to value the immediate over the long term. Instant gratification is no longer a demeaning idiom but a descriptive depiction of our perspective, even for many Christians. It's even seeped into our perspective of the gospel, as if it is something to be marketed and sold for worldly gain rather than shared and received for eternal life. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones notes,

True evangelism does not offer some panacea for all the ills in our life in this world; it does not promise to make us perfect in a moment or set the whole world right. It says rather, "In the world ye shall have tribulation; but fear not, I have overcome the world."⁵

If you demand your inheritance from God today, it's not the gospel you've believed.

Our inheritance is a certainty but a future one, but that should not keep us from looking forward to it. Like children on Christmas Eve who go to bed with anticipation of all that Christmas Day will bring, children of God live with a holy expectation for the morning of glory. On that day, we who are sojourners in this life will arrive at our heavenly home (John 14:1-13). We who have enjoyed but a taste of heaven in communion will be ushered into a heavenly banquet, where we will feast together in perfect union with Christ (Matt. 22:1-14). And we will reign with Christ over the heavenly kingdom as vice-regents over a new creation.

Most importantly though, we are not only heirs of the kingdom but "heirs of God." He is our ultimate inheritance. As the psalmist sings so may every child of God,

In heaven whom have I but you alone?
On earth there's no one else whom I adore.
Although my heart may fail and flesh grow weak,
God is my strength and portion evermore.⁶

As our chief end is indeed to glorify God, most certainly we will enjoy him forever.⁷

Writing in the Middle Ages, Franciscan friar Francois Rabelais said of himself, "I owe much. I possess nothing. I give the rest to the poor." In contrast, James Montgomery Boice says, "How different with God. God owes nothing, he possesses everything, and he gives it all to his

⁵ Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *The Reign of Grace: Romans 5-8* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 2:846.

⁶ *Sing Psalms: New Metrical Versions of the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 2017).

⁷ "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." "The Shorter Catechism Q. 1," in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 355.

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children.”⁸ Why then are we so easily distracted and enticed by the trinkets and so-called treasures of today, when our inheritance awaits us? Will we forget our Lord’s command?

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:19-21).

Children of God, by God’s grace you have been adopted by God, confirmed by his Spirit, and endowed as heirs with Christ. What do we need that he has not given? “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). Indeed, he “has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence” (2 Pet. 1:3). For we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God!

“To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” (2 Pet. 3:18).

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Reign of Grace: Romans 5-8* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 2:846.