

June 24, 2007

“From Slavery to Sonship” Galatians 4:1-7

FCF: Prodigal suspicion

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because we have been adopted into God’s family,
(anchor) we must live as slaves no more.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

I came across a new term this past week – “prodigal suspicion.” It stems from the “Parable of the Prodigal Sons” Jesus told as recorded in Luke 15 and comes in two manifestations, each related to the two sons of the story. The younger son, burdened by his past sins and present guilt, could see only what he had failed to be and to do. And so he was convinced his father could never forgive him for squandering his life as he had.

But the other son had his problems too. True, unlike his brother, he had dutifully stayed at home. But he also was relationally distant from the father, feeling his service to be a burden, not trusting him, unable to know the joy of self-abandonment in the home.

What these two had in common was looking to themselves to gauge whether they were right with their father – one despairing, the other presumptuous. Both suspicious. Both looking to themselves and their own record. Neither looking to the Father’s heart. And neither enjoying the love of the father as they should. I wonder. Could that be us?

SCRIPTURE READING: Galatians 4:1-7

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

What we’re talking about is the gospel, not religion. Many religious people are in bondage. They are like John Wesley in his post-graduate Oxford days in the Holy Club – a group devoted to disciplining themselves in the faith ([READ John Stott quote, p.109](#)):

He was the son of a clergyman and already a clergyman himself. He was orthodox in belief, religious in practice, upright in conduct and full of good works. He and his friends visited the inmates of the prisons and work-houses of Oxford. They took pity on the slum children of the city, providing them with food, clothing and education. They observed Saturday as the Sabbath as well as Sunday. They went to church and to Holy Communion. They gave alms, searched the Scriptures, fasted and prayed. But they were bound in the fetters of their own religion, for they were trusting in themselves that they were righteous, instead of putting their trust in Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Listen. The gospel sets us free, not into bondage. And t is this Paul is addressing here.

Remember where we are in this letter. In chapter 3, Paul has been pressing on his readers to “let the law do its work,” recognizing it is meant to serve not as a savior but as a warden and a guardian, hemming us in and driving us on to the Savior. With that in mind, Paul then insistently asks, “*Don’t you know who you are? You are children of God. You are one with each other. You are heirs of the promise.*” And all this not in any way by our efforts or merit but by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Now in chapter 4, wanting us to really hear and appreciate the riches of the gospel, Paul shifts and expands on the images he has just used. He speaks of children, heirs, and slaves. He also speaks of sons, security, a Father, and a family. Something has changed. Where once we were in bondage, now we have been embraced. Where once we were slaves, now we are sons. We’ve been adopted into God’s family, Paul tells us. And so, no matter how strong that old temptation pulls, we must live as slaves no more.

I. SECURE IN WHO WE ARE

Why? Because, as God’s children, we are secured and secure in who we are.

A) *No Longer Slaves*

Who are we? Negatively stated, we are no longer slaves (READ Galatians 4:1-3).

1. The image of minority

Paul is utilizing the image of the customs of the day involving an “heir apparent” – all his by promise but not experience; lord of all, possessor of none. A minor under supervision of the appointed “guardians and managers” such that he was no better off than a slave.

2. The reality of enslavement

Indeed, Paul says that, under the law, we were “enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.” The term used here implies rudimentary things, the very basics, the ABC’s. But it’s more than that. It often referred to a pagan understanding of the “elementary spirits” of the universe. A statement absolutely shocking to Paul’s readers. Relying upon the law or pagan idols is essentially the same – a self-righteousness abhorrent to God!

Abhorrent to God and enslaving to man. And so Paul cries out against this.

Illustration:

Against any message outside of the gospel of grace. Think back to John Wesley. It was a few years later that Wesley (READ Wesley quotes) came to “trust in Christ, in Christ only for salvation” and was given an inward assurance that his sins had been taken away. After this, looking back to his pre-conversion experience, his days in the Holy Club, he wrote, “I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son.”

B) But Now Sons

Follower of Christ, who are you? Something has happened, has changed. And it is clearly marked out in the text (READ Galatians 4:4-5). Once slaves, now made sons.

1. The image of “adoption”

Here again, Paul is utilizing an image from the day – “adoption.” The adoptee, often a slave, was taken out of their previous state and placed in a new relationship of son to a father. All the old debts cancelled, a new name, a new life as part of a new family.

2. The implication of “adoption”

Received into the number, given a right to all the privileges of the natural born children.

Illustration:

Remember the story of “Ben-Hur”? After his boyhood friend Messala’s fanatic loyalty to Rome made him an enemy, Judah Ben-Hur is found guilty of an attempted murder he did not commit. His family is banished and he is enslaved on a Roman warship. During a raging sea battle, he saves the life of a Roman nobleman, Quintus Arrius. Arrius, moved by what he sees in this slave, adopts him and gives him his name.

Everything changes. It’s a major shift in the plot. He is now Quintus Arrius the younger, a man of great power and wealth. Messala cannot touch this son of Rome.

Application:

And there’s something of that for us – real changes, a shift in the plot. Being adopted by God’s grace, given the privileges of sonship, we are still sinners but sin does not characterize us in the way it once did. It is no longer our master. Nor are we alone, left to struggle through this life on our own as we once did. We are part of a larger family, new relationships created, new attitudes begun, a sweet familial interdependence. And then, in addition to all that, we have an older brother, Jesus, whose company and protection we enjoy and in whose likeness we are being remade. All that has changed.

So too has our perspective. Sinclair Ferguson, in his book, Children of the Living God, notes three things here. First, sonship brings a sense of security. I am a child of God. He is my Father. What do I need fear? For what do I need worry? Second, a sense

of direction. No longer rootless and aimless, I now have a purpose and standards to which to hold. And third, moral fiber. No longer need I be shaped and molded, pushed and pulled by everything around me, drifting according to what everyone thinks or says. It is my Father's Word I hear and heed. I have been adopted into His family. I am secure in who He has made me, how He is remaking me, and the wise plans and loving purposes He has for me. Who am I? I am God's adopted child. I need live as a slave no more.

II. STUNNED BY WHAT GOD HAS DONE

But how has this happened? What is it that has transpired to set this in motion? We see it in the transition of verse 4, two of the very sweetest words – "*But God...*"

A) *Sending Forth His Son*

(**READ Galatians 4:4-5**) A twofold sending. First, the sending of His Son.

1. When

Paul tells us when – "*when the fullness of time had come.*" It was the perfect time. Roman law and order allowed for extensive travel. Greek language and culture lent cohesion to society. The old pagan gods had lost their hold and the people were hungry. And the law of God had created in the people of God a longing for the Messiah to come.

2. Who

And come He did. In all His divinity – fully God. In all His humanity – fully man. In all His righteousness – fully obeying the law of God and undergoing its curse for our sake.

3. Why

Paul speaks of the purposes of all this as well – to redeem us. To set prisoners, slaves, free at the cost of the purchase price of Himself. It was an atoning purpose. But not only that, it was an adopting purpose as well. Listen again (**READ Galatians 4:4-5**).

Illustration:

It's something like a scene from a romance movie where a once ignoring now awestruck woman comes to realize what it is this man who loves her so has done. "*Why did you do all this?*" "*Because I love you. Because I wanted to make you mine.*"

That's what we see here. God sent forth His Son to make us sons. It's stunning.

B) *Sending Forth the Spirit*

All the more so when we consider the other sending Paul describes here (**READ Galatians 4:6**). Now why did He send the Spirit? Wasn't the Son enough?

1. To assure us of whose we are

To secure us to Himself, it was enough. But our Father wants to do more than secure us. He wants to assure us. He is concerned for our status and standing before Him and our experience and joy as well. He wants us to live before Him not as slaves but as sons.

2. To encourage us as we pray

And so He has sent the Spirit to assure us of whose we are. And to encourage us as we pray, as we cry out in the storms of our lives, to speak to Him not as slaves but as sons. The Spirit's is a quiet inward witness, a divine whisper, teaching us, enabling us, impelling us to pray. The voice of God's Spirit is now on the lips of God's children.

Why? Because He loves us and He wants us to know that. And that is stunning.

Illustration:

Children, as you know, are apt to push the boundaries, probe the limits, test the word and the love of their parents. Adoptive children, in particular, often struggle with their parentage, their place in the family. And as such, they may then act that out.

Parents, as you know, long for their children with groanings too deep for words. That they would go the right way, choose the right path, know that they are loved, and believe that they are safe. And so, longing for their children, they come alongside to speak to their hearts. *“I love you. You’re mine. You always will be. And I love you.”*

It is that sort of longing Paul is speaking to here in the heart of our heavenly Father for the hearts of His children. That we might know who and whose we are.

Application:

All of which prompts us to approach Him in a whole new way. To come to Him as our *“Abba! Father!”* – a term laden with the greatest respect and deepest endearment. Something akin to “Daddy” today. And here’s the thing. He has sent forth His Son and He has sent forth the Spirit because He wants us to approach Him that way. Do you see? Not as a higher power or a cosmic buddy or a condemning judge but as a heavenly Father, our heavenly Father. Something as shocking for us now as it was for folks then.

The shape and feel of Jesus’ prayers – with all their intimacy and openness – is to be the shape and feel of our own. Coming to Him as children. Simply, honestly, and straightforwardly. Boldly, settled in the promises and privileges that are ours. And expectantly, knowing that the whole of our lives is answered prayer lived out – answered prayer according to what He knows is for our highest, deepest, truest best.

We are not slaves. And we should not pray like slaves. We are sons. By God’s grace, we have been adopted into God’s family. And we must live as slaves no more.

CONCLUSION:

Pulling it all together, Paul then says (**READ Galatians 4:7**). The gospel offers us a life of freedom, not of bondage. Not of our merit or our effort but all of His grace. Not of insecurity or uncertainty but of surety and significance. We’ve been adopted, given a place at the table, a place in God’s family. We have been taken out of slavery and brought into sonship. This is the goal of it all, the very apex of salvation, the crowning achievement of God’s wondrous revelation and redemption. Justification, great as it is, is but the basic blessing upon which adoption is founded – the foundation upon which the house in which we live stands. Having been made right with God in His court, we are then embraced and enfolded into His family. So vital, so essential, so significant is all this that J. I. Packer, in his classic Knowing God, wrote (**READ [Knowing God](#) quote**):

You sum up the whole of the New Testament teaching in a single phrase, if you speak of it as the revelation of the Fatherhood of the holy Creator. In the same way, you sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one’s holy Father. If you want to judge how well someone understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.

So, do we understand? Now that’s worth some careful thought and reflection.

And, dare I say, even some homework. Look with me at the “Quotes and Notes” insert and the comparison between the life of the orphans/slave to performance and the life of the child of grace. Take it home and prayerfully consider it. Not that you don’t have enough to do already. But this may change the spirit in which you’re doing it. Use this to go deeper, asking the Lord to search your heart, to show you more of who and whose you are (**READ Galatians 4:7**). May the Lord impress this upon us all all the more.

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