

Romans 8:14-15

Spirit-Led Sonship

We come at last this evening to the chief benefit of Christ for all who believe in Him. This morning, we heard about what it means for children to know God as God (and I hope the adults were paying careful attention by the way, because every word applied to them as well). Tonight we hear about what it means for children (and adults) to know God as Father.

It's remarkable; isn't it? For seven and a half chapters, Paul has been opening up for us the good news of the benefits of Jesus Christ for sinners through faith, and just tonight we come for the first time to the doctrine of adoption—the truth of how everyone who receives Christ actually receives the status of son with Christ in the family of God.

We almost got to this in chapter 5—you remember how chapter 5 began? Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God! What a glorious truth—God takes those who were His enemies, suffers Himself the punishment they deserve, performs Himself the duties they owe, makes them alive to see it, gives them faith to depend upon it, ends their war of hostility against Himself and elevates them to the status of allies and friends.

But 5:1 was just the tip of the iceberg, and tonight we come to the solid mountain underneath, the mountain of adoption. And I'd like to begin by thinking about what this phrase at the end of v14 means, "sons of God."

We'll come back to the first half of v14 in a moment, but right now, let's answer the question, "What does it mean to be a son of God?" We've had to think about this before in the Genesis series, when we came upon the sons of God and the daughters of men in Genesis 6, and we found there that this was men from line of the woman, the line of faith, the covenant line... and daughters from the line of the serpent, the unbelieving line who were more like their father the devil.

In other words, to be a son of God is not just a legal relational connection with certain rights and privileges. It is that, but it is not just that. In the ancient world, and actually until quite recently in the entire world, to be a son meant to bear a family resemblance and to enter the family trade. That is why you might have last names in one culture that are basically the father's name, and in another culture that is basically the father's trade. If you were the son of a smith, you became a smith.

In the Roman world to which Paul was writing, this idea of being a son by bearing resemblance and following in the trade was even stronger in the case of adoption. Among the wealthier classes, it often happened that a father would either have no son or no son that he thought was enough like him to carry on his name and inherit his life, his wealth, his work. A man in that position would search for someone he thought was more like him, and he would legally adopt him to supersede all of the natural children.

Now, there are some ways in which the parallel does not follow in our adoption as Christians. As we have already heard, it was absolute enmity and unlikeness to God in which we began, so we mustn't think God sought us out based upon something in us. And it is utterly impossible that we would ever supersede the true Son, who is so much like God that Scripture calls Jesus the exact imprint of God's nature and the radiance of God's glory and the image of the invisible God.

But this much does carry over: to be a son of God means to bear the family resemblance and to carry on the family work. We see Jesus defining sonship in this kind of language in John 8.

John 8:34-44 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father." ³⁹ They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are doing what your father did." They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God." ⁴² Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your

father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Earlier, Jesus had said of Himself,

John 5:17-19 But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." ¹⁸ This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. ¹⁹ So Jesus said to them, "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.

So, we see that Jesus describes even His own sonship in terms of likeness to God and doing the works of God, and the sonship of the Pharisees in terms of likeness to the devil and doing the works of the devil.

Now, Jesus is the true Son, the firstborn. And His Sonship to God, His likeness to God, His doing the works of God is so unique that it is impossible for anyone to have sonship to God apart from Him. In fact, our text has been preparing us to see our sonship as only coming from being joined to Jesus, the only begotten Son:

Romans 8:5-11 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

As we have seen in those verses, the ministry of the Spirit is to work in us the life and nature of Jesus. v9 calls Him the Spirit of Christ. v10 describes the Spirit's indwelling as Christ Himself being in us. And v11 takes what has happened to Jesus' body as the absolute guarantee of what will happen to ours. Just so our sonship is a participation in Christ's own Sonship. Consider the following passages from Ephesians and Colossians:

Ephesians 1:3-14 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Colossians 1:9-18 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸

And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

We see then this amazing truth: for us to be sons of God is for us to be joined to Jesus and filled with His Spirit so that whatever belongs to Jesus belongs to us *in* Jesus. And now we begin to see the connection back to v13, and can begin to look at the first half of v14. Because Jesus is the great sin-killer. God in Christ is the great sin-killer. That's just what we saw in v3: For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.

This is the family resemblance that is in view in Rom 8:14, this the family trade of sin-killing. Last week in v13, we focused primarily upon our being debtors to, dependent upon, the Spirit. But if we were to summarize what v13 *requires* of us in dependence upon the Spirit, we might put it this way: "if you are not killing sin, sin is killing you." Here we are, children of God; we are in the family trade: sin-killers! Wouldn't that be a great name, not John Smith, but John Sin-Killer!

Now we can go back and see what it means to be led by the Spirit. For if the phrase immediately following it has to do with our family resemblance to God in Christ and following in the family trade of God in Christ; and, the previous phrase specifies that this is "by the Spirit, putting to death the deeds of the body," then we are discovering that being "led by the Spirit" means something very different than what you hear in the "what this means to me" so-called "Bible" studies in America today.

Being led by the spirit is NOT finding just the right frequency of being—getting to the right place or whatever new age whatnot—until you can tune in the promptings that will allow you to divine God's secret plan for your future... so you tune in to figure out the right husband or the right wife or the right job or the right career or the right school, etc.

Being led by the Spirit is being directed, perhaps even dragged, by the Spirit in the killing of sin. We see this in a parallel passage in Galatians:

Galatians 5:16-26 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Another question that we might as well answer, while we're looking at being led by the Spirit is the question of "how?" How does the Spirit do this leading? And the Bible answer is that the Spirit leads by the Word.

Ephesians 5:17-21 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

With its parallel:

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

And perhaps the clearest text on what being led by the Spirit means:

1 Corinthians 2:12-14 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴ The

natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Being led by the Spirit is being absolutely dependent upon the Spirit in using the Word. In fact, no one can claim to be led by the Spirit who discounts the Word, and especially the Word in corporate worship. We saw the place of Christ's word *sung together in worship* in these texts, and if time permitted we might study up Romans 10 and 1Cor 14 to find that corporate preaching and corporate praying also have a properly central place in how the Spirit "leads." Isn't that different from the individualistic—spiritual—antennae version of being led by the Spirit that is so often bandied about?

So being led by the Spirit is crucifying the flesh, abandoning trust in self, abandoning pleasing of self, a bowing of the will in what we do and a bowing of the heart in what we enjoy. It is an obedience that is powered by the Spirit in use of the Word, particularly in corporate worship.

The idea of being led could be that of a captive, who is led by force; or, it could be that of a blind person, who is led by necessity. In either case, the one being led must do whatever the leader directs—there is an absolute submission and dependence here. Obedience, submission, dependence—these are what it means to be led by the Spirit. Except for we are not led as captives, or even as the blind; rather, we are led as children.

And that is how Paul transitions into the glorious truth in v15. We are not led by violence to our wills as captives. We are not led by the relinquishing of our wills as blind people. Each of these involves a slavish fear, and Paul begins v15 by announcing that we did NOT receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear! Rather, we have received the Spirit of adoption as sons. We are led by the inflaming of our love for our heavenly father—not violence of will or absence of will but enrapturing of will that comes out of this amazing love relationship. God fills us with filial affection—the burning desire to please and serve a parent—for Himself.

On one hand, our crying out Abba! Father! expresses the confidence that we have in the legal finality of this adoption transaction. There is no uncertainty here, no timidity. The next verse talks about the Spirit's bearing witness *with* our spirit, and we'll talk more about that next time. But He doesn't just bear witness *with* our spirit, He is also the one who works this holy confidence in Christ in our own hearts. He is the source of *our own* testimony, *our own* certainty that we have all the rights and privileges of the children of God in Christ. We see this in a parallel passage in:

Galatians 4:4-6 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

So that's the one hand: confidence in legal finality. But what we see in v15 is not just a doctrinal affirmation; it is the cry of a heart. It is not just legal certainty, but emotional delight. The doctrinal affirmation means that I am sure that the flesh can no longer own me because of the legal transaction that has taken place. The emotional delight means that I am so taken with desire for and joy in my new Abba, my Daddy, that there is *no room left* in my heart for the flesh!

How does the family resemblance of a son of God show itself in sin-killing? The Holy Spirit leads us—not through slavish fear but ravishing love, using the Bible both to hold before us the unparalleled pleasures of our Heavenly Father and His holy and righteous and good commands that we are compelled from within to keep by our overwhelming satisfaction in Him.

The Holy Spirit does this in our hearts. This is what is meant by "being led by the Spirit." This is what is meant by being "sons of God."

Do you find Father this satisfying? Are you this abandoned to His word by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in you? Don't just sit there and wait for the Spirit to cry out within you. Don't even wait for a whisper. **John 1:12-13** says, "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."

Receive Christ. Look to His perfect life lived in place of yours. Look to His bleeding death under God's judgment for your sins. Receive Christ's life and Christ's death as the only hope for a sinner like you. And you will—you WILL—be given the right to become a child of God. You will have His Spirit. You will be led by His Spirit. You will be His Son!

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