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The Prodigal's Suspicion and the Global Orphan Crisis

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Together for Adoption

Introduction: There are a number of challenges within the evangelical church that would be greatly helped if our churches recovered afresh the beautiful truth of our adoption in Christ. Here are two of those challenges. The first relates to the Christian's own state of mind and heart; the second relates to the church's calling to care for orphans (James 1:27). And let me just state on the front end that both of these challenges are connected to each other as we shall see.

- A. **The Internal Challenge of Prodigal Suspicion.** There's a great little book by Sinclair Ferguson called *Children of the Living God*. Fairly early on in the book he talks about the prodigal son in Luke 15 to help us understand a little more about ourselves and how we often perceive our relationship with God. He notes that when the prodigal son finally decided that it was time to return to his father, his plan was to tell his father that he was no longer worthy to be called his son. The prodigal son's thinking was, "I really messed up. When I asked for my inheritance and left with it, I dishonored my father profoundly. I've blantly squandered and belittled his love. So, when I return, I'll return as his slave not his son. It's the right thing for me to do." The prodigal is suspicious of the father's love for him. "He certainly cannot treat me or love me any longer as a son."

Sinclair Ferguson sees something in the prodigal's thinking that parallels how we as Christians often think of God and His fatherly love for us: "Jesus was underlining the fact that - despite assumptions to the contrary - the reality of the love of God for us is often the last thing in the world to dawn upon us. As we fix our eyes upon ourselves, our past failures, our present guilt, it seems impossible to us that the Father could love us. Many Christians go through much of their life with the prodigal's suspicion. Their concentration is upon their sin and failure; all their thoughts are introspective" (*Children of the Living God*, 27).

When the prodigal son says, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants'" (Luke 15:18-19), he is thinking in terms of wages-earned rather than extravagant love and grace-received.

When we as believers relate to God like this, we are slow to return to the Father after we have sinned against him. We don't anticipate, let alone expect, His fatherly embrace. And when we do return to Him, we think of Him primarily as our master and not Father. As a result, real Christian joy is absent and passionate Christian living is lacking. It's almost impossible (if not impossible) to mobilize Christians who doubt God's love for them to care for orphans over the long haul, or at least to mobilize Christians who will serve orphans with great joy and freedom. We'll look more at this towards the end. This leads us to:

- B. **The External Challenge of Church Practice.** God has called the church to care for orphans. But the practice of caring for orphans is fraught with massive challenges. Allow me to overwhelm you with some staggering numbers.

- There are 143 million orphans in our world. If all the orphans in the world were moved to the country of Mexico, Mexico's population would more than double, growing from 108,700,000 to 251,700,000.
- Over 16 million children were newly orphaned in 2003.
- There are approximately 17.5 million orphans who are ages 0-5.
- There are approximately 47 million orphans who are ages 6-11.
- There are approximately 79 million orphans who are ages 12-17.
- 87.6 million orphans live in Asia.
- 43.4 million orphans live in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- There are as many orphaned and vulnerable children in Ethiopia as there are people in greater NYC.
- 12.4 million orphans live in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Almost 1.5 million children live in public care in Central and Eastern Europe. That's our world.

What about the United States?

More than 800,000 children pass through our country's foster care system each year. There are over 500,000 children in our foster care system right now. 129,000 of those children are waiting to be adopted from foster care right now. That's how many people live in the capitol of South Carolina. Approximately, 25,000 children age out of the foster care system each year, many with no support system and little to no life skills. There are currently over 5,400 children in South Carolina foster care. Over 1,500 of them are waiting to be adopted. So far this year only a couple hundred of them have been adopted.

This brings us to this question: How many children are adopted each year? Between 118,000 and 127,000 children have been adopted every year since 1987. More than 50 percent of all adoptions are handled by public agencies or come from countries outside the United States. More than one-third of Americans have seriously considered adopting, but no more than 2 percent have actually adopted. Only 4 percent of families with children (1.7 million households) contain adopted children.

With this many orphans in the United States and in the world the church has a monumental task before it if it is to practice true religion. James 1:27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." Clearly, the church has its work cut out for it.

But as I noted in passing earlier, Christians who are not confident of God's love and delight in them as His dear children will find either extremely difficult to care for orphans when it's hard, really hard. When you're not convinced that the Father delights in you even as He delights in Jesus, you don't have the emotional capitol necessary to visit orphans in their distress over the long haul.

Why do I believe this to be the case? The only people who are *truly* able to turn their eyes outward to care for the world's most needy are those who knowingly live within and enjoy the loving gaze of their heavenly Father. If our we are not confident of His love, our eyes will turn inward, with the result that we will primarily be concerned with

our needs, *our* lack, *our* disappointment, rather than the needs of orphans. As a result, we'll be afraid to risk or do the hard thing if it needs to be done. Or we will give our lives to care for orphans as an attempt to earn our heavenly Father's love. We will serve orphans as an attempt to earn God's delight. We may not know that this is why we're doing what we're doing, but it is what drives us deep within. Our hearts may be secretly ruled by thoughts like this, "I will pour myself out to defend and care for the orphan. Maybe then, if I do that, God will be pleased with me." Neither of these ways of thinking or living flows out of the gospel. The gospel is good news. It's joy-news because it speaks to us of the Father's love that has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Both of these challenges, the internal challenge of prodigal suspicion and the external challenge of church practice, would be greatly helped if the beautiful truth of our adoption in Christ freshly gripped our hearts.

So let's step back and ask this two part question: Why is it important that the doctrine of adoption be recovered within the church and how would its recovery help us with these two challenges in particular:

I. **The truth of adoption showcases God's saving activity within the grand story of redemption.**

A. Adoption is the highest blessing of the gospel. J.I. Packer writes, "adoption is the highest blessing of the Gospel, higher even than the gift of justification "because of the richer relationship with God that it involves." He continues, "Justification is a *forensic* idea, conceived in terms of *law*, and viewing God as *judge*...Adoption is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of *love*, and viewing God as *father*. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the father is greater" (*Knowing God*, 186-188).

I agree with Packer, adoption *is* the highest blessing of the gospel but it's also *more* than that.

B. Paul's use of the term "adoption" transports us to *epoch* events within the grand story of redemption.

Epoch Event One: In Ephesians 1:4-5, Paul states that in love God the Father "predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." This is really quite amazing: adoption's marking function began before God created the universe. Paul takes us all the way back even before the dawning of human history, even before God spoke His all-powerful, life-giving words, "Let there be!", and says that God marked us out to be His sons through adoption. And Paul states that God did this "in love" (v. 4). Even before the earth existed God marked us out (i.e., predestined us) for the great privilege of being His children through adoption. Adoption was not a divine afterthought. It was in God's mind even before the dawning of human history. One amazing truth we learn from Paul's words here, as John Piper has said, is that "[adoption is greater than the universe.](#)"

Epoch Event Two: Given Israel's central role in the unfolding story of God's work of redemption, adoption's importance *within* the story of salvation can be inferred from Romans 9:4 where Paul identifies adoption as one of the great privileges that Israel enjoyed as God's chosen people. He writes, "They are Israelites, and to them belong *the adoption*, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises." Scholars believe that Israel received adoption, becoming God's corporate son, when God constituted them a nation at Mt. Sinai, three months *after* He delivered His people from Egypt ([See "Understanding the Love of Adoption" for more on Israel's adoption](#)). It is very significant that adoption shows up at this key moment within the unfolding story of redemption.

Epoch Event Three: In Galatians 4:4-5, referring to the wonderful climax of the story of redemption, Paul writes, "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*" (emphasis mine). Paul identifies adoption as the grand purpose or objective of redemption. He could not have written it any more clearly. God sent His Son to redeem us so *that we* might be adopted! God the Father sent His eternal and natural Son so that we could become His adopted sons. Once again, adoption shows up at a key time—the climactic time—within the unfolding story of redemption.

Epoch Event Four: As I have mentioned a couple times already, adoption plays a leading role from before the beginning of the story of redemption (Ephesians 1:4-5) all the way to the consummation of redemption's story when all of God's adopted children enjoy the full privileges of their adoption on the new earth. In Romans 8:23, Paul writes, "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for *adoption as sons*, the redemption of our bodies" (emphasis mine). Paul identifies the glorification of our bodies as the consummation of our adoption. God, as it were, finalizes our adoption as sons when the story of redemption reaches its intended goal.

When you consider the central role that adoption plays within the overall story of redemption, you realize that it reveals the unfathomable: God actually cherishes and delights in us, His children! He is, as it were, moving heaven and earth to bring us to Himself! Meditate on this. Let it work its way deep into the core of your being. It is this truth that will mobilize Christians to care for orphans with great joy and commitment.

II. The truth of adoption cultivates a deep longing for the consummation of God's redemptive purposes. Two Texts:

Galatians 4:6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

Romans 8:15 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!"

A. What is the "Abba! Father!" cry? Though I do believe "Abba! Father!" is an inner cry of familial intimacy ("God, you are *my* Father!"), I do not think that its primary significance

lies in its familial intimacy. Rather, it is primarily a hope-filled *cry for deliverance*—a cry grounded in the reality of Jesus’ redemptive accomplishment.

Ultimately, we should understand the “Abba! Father!” cry as the intense expression of our deep inward groaning for the completion of our redemption—the renewal of our decaying bodies. It is the Spirit’s work to make us long for the full realization of our adoption ([Romans 8:23](#)). Let me explain.

Jesus, our Elder Brother, is the only one on record in Scripture who ever cried, “Abba! Father!”; and he cried it in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his wrath-bearing work on the cross. When “Abba! Father!” came from Jesus’ sinless lips, it was a humble yet impassioned cry for deliverance: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” ([Mark 14:36](#)). Although Jesus prayed for the removal of the cup of his Father’s wrath against our sin, he humbly submitted to his Father’s will and drank every last drop that he might deliver us from what we justly deserved.

The good news of the gospel is that the Father’s all-wise and all-gracious decision not to grant Jesus’ “Abba! Father!” cry, coupled with Jesus’ humble submission to his Father’s will, resulted in an indescribably good gift to us—the gift of sonship through adoption ([Galatians 4:4-5](#)).

For the joy set before him ([see Hebrews 12:2](#)) Jesus submitted to the will of his Father and, as a result, eternally secured our adoption as sons; and, as Paul goes on to say, because of what Jesus accomplished in his life, death and resurrection, and because of our subsequent status as sons, God “has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” ([Galatians 4:6](#)).

Here is what we must keep in mind: “Abba! Father!” was first cried by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was a cry for deliverance. The Spirit now places that same cry within our hearts **because** we have become God’s sons through adoption. This means that “Abba! Father!” has become *our* cry for deliverance. But we cry not for the removal of the cup of wrath against our sin—no, our Elder Brother already drank that cup in our place—but for the consummation of our adoption, that is, for the redemption of our bodies ([Romans 8:23](#)).

Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus has transformed the “Abba! Father!” cry into a cry for deliverance that is grounded in the hope of the gospel, and it is the work of the Spirit to place it in our hearts. Therefore, to cry “Abba! Father!” is to cry for the glorification of our decaying bodies and for our deliverance from this present “time of affliction and suffering” and our intense struggle with indwelling sin ([see Romans 8:18 & 23](#)). After all, it is in Christ Jesus that God justifies and glorifies all whom He has predestined to adoption as sons ([Romans 8:30 and Ephesians 1:5](#)) in order that the resurrected Christ might be “the firstborn among many brothers” ([Romans 9:29](#)).

- B. What, then, is the Spirit of Adoption’s ministry? It is to bring the fact of our future experience of glorification to bear upon our present internal experience so that we might increasingly long for the day when we are revealed to be the true sons of God ([Romans 8:19](#)). [Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15](#) teach us that the “Abba! Father!” cry

comes from a heart that is eagerly anticipating the great day when we will live on the New Earth as glorified children of God.

Those who are longing for and are confident of that great day, are people who are willing to pour their lives out in service to our world's most needy, orphans. Knowing that God will one day completely deliver us from our affliction in this fallen world, motivates us to mirror God's delivering work by serving orphans and seeing them placed in loving Christian homes.

III. The truth of adoption empowers God's people to practice true religion.

No one should be able to hear the orphan's cry like those who cry "Abba! Father!" The Spirit of Adoption, who is the down payment of our future completed salvation, places this deep groaning within our hearts for our final deliverance so that we may increasingly live as "children of that consummated kingdom" now. Because of this, let me suggest that this "Abba! Father!" cry should serve as the lens through which we read, interpret, and apply James 1:27.

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: *to visit orphans and widows in their affliction*, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" [emphasis mine].

If any group of people should be inclined to visit orphans in their affliction in order that they might remove them from it, it should be those in whose hearts the Spirit has placed the "Abba! Father!" cry. It should be those who, through their adoption as sons in Christ, have the sure hope of final and full deliverance from "the sufferings of this present time" (Romans 8:18). If there is anyone who should deeply empathize with the orphan's cry, it should be person who has the firstfruits of the Spirit and who, as a result, groans inwardly as he "waits eagerly for adoption as sons, that is, the redemption of [his] body" (Romans 8:23). **If any group of people should be easily mobilized to care for orphans, it should be those in whose hearts God's love has been poured out through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5).** No community of people in this world should be more attuned to the cries and groans of orphans than the dearly loved children of God. Therefore, we, of all people on earth, should lead the way in caring for orphans in their affliction.

When we consider all that God has done to bring us into His family through adoption, we realize that it reveals the unfathomable: God actually cherishes and delights in us, His children! He is, as it were, moving heaven and earth to bring us to Himself! The love of God as revealed in the gospel replaces the prodigal's suspicion with joy in the Father's delight!

Let's commit to meditating on this as a church. Let's pray that it work its way deep into the core of our corporate consciousness. It is this truth that will mobilize us to care for orphans with great joy and enduring commitment.