

What is the greatest privilege the gospel brings?

Lesson 8

Like a lot of people raised outside their passport country, I struggle with a sense of identify. I have always felt uneasy no matter where I've lived. If you were to ask me to share my deepest, most persistent negative emotion, without having to think about it, I'd answer loneliness. I don't feel I belong. I am a perpetual outsider. That feeling, however untrue, has been at the root of my deepest temptations and struggles. You can understand, then, when I say that the greatest solace for my soul has been the doctrine of adoption, to know that I belong to the family of God, invited into his family with Jesus Christ as my elder brother. Adoption is the greatest benefit the gospel brings because it's the privilege of a relationship. With joy and open arms, I am invited to the table of God to eat of his pleasures; I do not fear being abandoned or rejected even in my worst moments, and best of all I can call my Father, "Abba".

The implications of this great truth will explode in your heart as you work through this lesson. It's an invitation to come into the fullness of intimacy with God and enjoy him and his family forever.

Studying

Read Galatians 3:26-4:7

Take a separate piece of paper and write out your answer to the questions:

1. Read verses 26-29 carefully. Make a list of the benefits and blessings that come to us through faith.
 2. What are the practical implications of the fact that we "clothe ourselves with Christ" (vs. 27)? How does the gospel of grace eliminate major cultural barriers (vs. 28)?
 3. How is being under the law like being an heir who is still a minor (4:1-3)?
 4. What does being a "child of God" and "clothed with Christ" say to you about living the Christian life?
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Reading

Read the following article entitled "From Slavery to Son-ship" and annotations in the margin.

Empowerment

From Slavery to Son-ship

By Paul Thompson

We might consider the evils of slavery something of the past. But are they?

Think for a moment about the impact other people have on you. Look at your life and see how you have filled its emptiness with people. As a result they have a strangle hold on you. See how they control your behavior by their approval and disapproval. They hold the power to ease your loneliness with their company, to send your spirits soaring with their praise, to bring you down to the depths with their criticism and rejection. Take a look at yourself spending almost every waking moment of your day placating and pleasing people, whether they are living or dead. You live by their norms, conform to their standards, seek their company, desire their love, dread their ridicule, long for their applause, meekly submit to the demands they lay upon you. You are terrified to go against the fashion in the way you dress, speak, act or even think. And observe how even when you control them, you depend upon them and are enslaved by them. People have become so much a part of your being that you cannot even imagine living a life that is unaffected or uncontrolled by them.

If that is not slavery, what is then? As I look at my own life, a dominant pattern has been the fear of rejection. It lurks in every pore of my body. The opinions of others exert a subtle yet controlling pressure on the words I speak and the words I don't speak—the tyranny of my peers control the decisions I make and the ones I refuse to make. Although I give the impression of composure and self-reliance, I am inwardly terrified by the fear of ridicule. This fear has far more paralyzing effect on me than a head-on attack or an outspoken harsh criticism.

Are not most of us immobilized by the thought of what others will think and say? How much good is left undone because of our fear of the opinion of others? The irony of all this is that the opinions we fear most are not those of people we really respect, yet these people influence our lives more than we want to admit. This innervating fear of our peers can create an appalling slavery that controls every aspect of our lives.

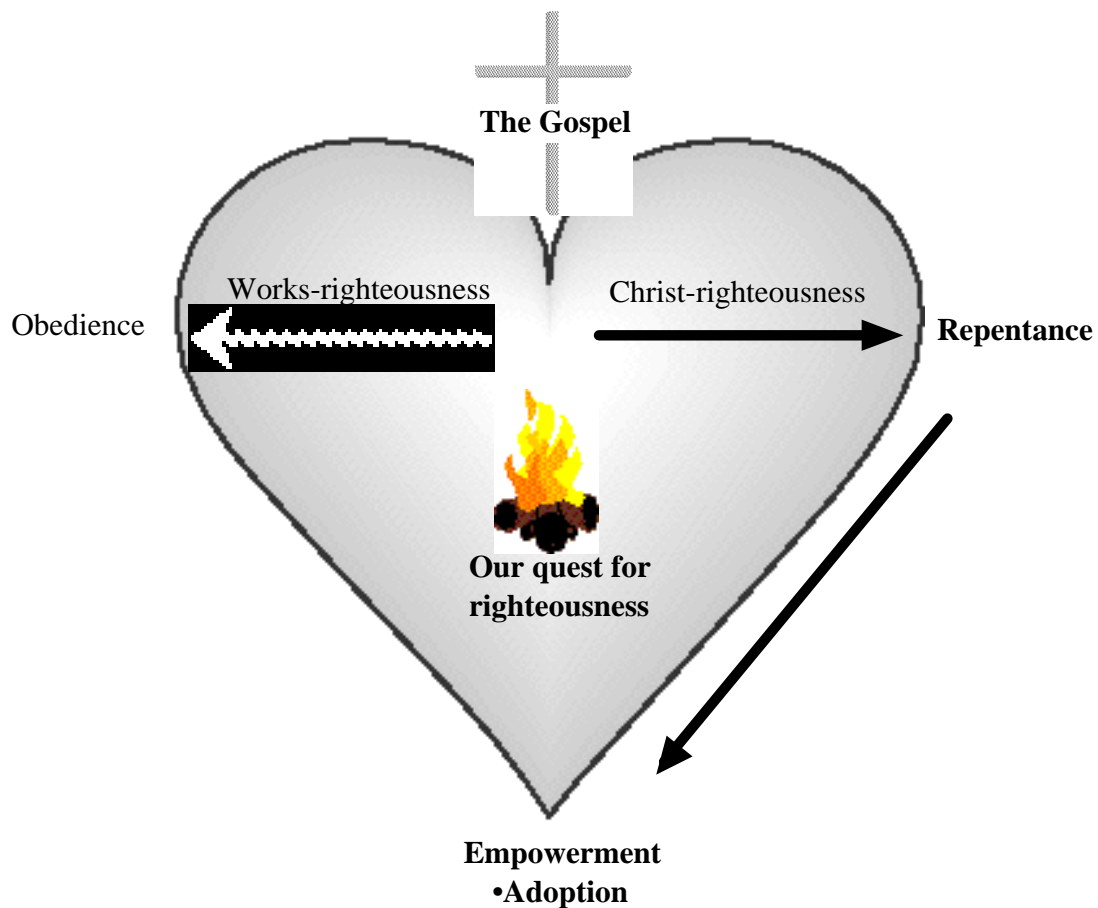
Slavery, the bondage that binds us to things or people or to our own selfish natures, seems to be alive and well in spite of Paul's emphatic declaration in Galatians 4:7, "You are no longer a slave, but a son." This is a statement of fact. When we are born into Christ's family through faith, we "receive the adoption as sons" (vs 4:5) with all its privileges and advantages. The influential theologian, J. I. Packer, writes, "If you want to judge how well a person 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. Adoption is the highest privilege the Gospel offers because of the richer relationship with God that it involves."

Yet for all practical purposes, Christians can deny their identity as sons and live under fear as slaves. Paul asks in Galatians 4:8 and 9, "Formerly...you were slaves...do you wish to be enslaved...all over again?" And in Romans 8:15 Paul warns of the same danger, "you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear." It is possible for a Christian adopted into

God's family to live a diminished life of fear though he is in fact a child of God, adopted into this family.

How does this happen? There is a two-part dynamic to Christian growth. It is, in a sense, like the strokes of a two-cycle engine. Without a negative down stroke and a positive up stroke, the engine won't function. So it is in the Christian life; the down stroke we call repentance and the up stroke faith. Without these two realities the Christian life becomes, quite simply, as frustrating as cranking a lawn mower with a broken piston.

Throughout his letters Paul makes frequent reference to this dynamic. For instance in his Colossian letter he begins with the up stroke, "Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated," (vs. 3:2), but immediately moves to the down stroke, "Put to death what belongs to your earthly nature...which is idolatry" (vs. 3:5).



These two elements must go together. Each stimulates the other; if either one is de-emphasized it robs the other of power. To lose either one is to eliminate the joy and release of a gospel-empowered heart. On the one hand, we must discover the particular idolatries of our hearts and uproot them at the motivation level. On the other hand without a heart belief in our complete acceptance and adoption through Christ, the message of our sin would crush us so that we would deny or repress it. The more we believe in God's Father-love, the more we are able to realistically

face ourselves, flaws and faults. And the more we see our sin, the more precious and valuable we find his saving love and grace.

Our adoption into God's family is the story of a great transferal that, when we grasp it in faith, will change us from fearful slaves into worshiping sons and daughters. In Romans 8, Paul gives his most complete teaching on adoption. In verses 15-17, he enumerates the privileges of sonship.

First is security. A slave obeys out of fear of punishment or being dismissed, but a child has no fear of losing his relationship as a son. He cannot be demoted. There is the privilege of authority. In a house, slaves have no authority—they can only do what they are told. But children, although under their parents, are free to move about the house and take initiatives on their father's behalf. Another benefit is intimacy. They can run into "daddies" private quarters and climb on his lap. A slave could never do that! There is also assurance, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." And there is an inheritance waiting for us, "now if we are children, then heirs." We have an incredible future assured.

There is a sad reality in this lesson; many Christians are living as slaves when they are actually sons. Nothing could be more foolish and lamentable. Think of it! When he could be running through the house free and joyous, obeying his father out of gratitude and love, the slave-Christian is dour, dubious, obeying under compulsion, trying to gain the favor of his father. When he is naughty and disobedient, the son can expect discipline and loving instruction. But he never needs to fear the loss of his father's love. It is always there, whether he is good or bad. A slave-Christian concentrates on external behavior, making sure he keeps the rules. A son lives in an atmosphere of grace and relationship and intimacy.

How does sonship actually work to free us from slavery and fear? Take the case of slavery to people's opinion. When I fall under the tyranny of other people, I will feel something deep in my soul. It will come at times as a feeling of insecurity, anger or nervousness. The first key is to recognize the emotion and seek the cause. "I am being tempted to fear by this person's perception of me and I'm trying to save myself by pleasing him." I take the down-stroke. I repent not of the emotion, but of my attempts at self-salvation. Then I take the up stroke. I affirm my position as a child of God, I say, "I am a privileged Son. I have all the benefits of heaven at my disposal. As an adopted Son, accepted and loved by my Father, I am free to act in his best interests."

It's all a matter of repentance and faith—repentance from self-salvation which keeps us slave-bound and fearful, and faith in our adoption as a son which frees us to enjoy all the benefits of our inheritance in Christ.

Reflecting

In your small group, discuss the result of your study of the scripture lesson, your reading, and interact with the following questions.

1. Let's suppose you have been part of a crew of a large ocean liner. You have a tyrant as a captain, a dictator who oppresses the entire crew and keeps them in check by fear. What would life be like on that ship? Then one day the old captain dies and a new captain is in command of the ship. This captain is totally different. He is fair, kind and

loving. What would you have to do to begin to believe that the new captain was different? How would you convince the crew who still believe the new captain was a tyrant? In Christ, we do not only have a new captain, we have a Savior who has delivered us from the old captain and has adopted us into his family, making us sons and daughters! The question is how do we begin to live out our new identity? Are we still living under the old tyrant in fear and slavery? **Discuss this little parable. What are its implications?**

2. Which of the following characteristics of a slave mentality are strongest in you? What would be the opposite? In other words, if you were to truly believe in your son-ship status, how would that change your attitudes and conduct?

Slave:

Compulsive obedience: obeys God out of fear of rejection or punishment

Hides: Tries to cover up his failings

Begrudging repentance: finds it hard to admit wrongdoing

Reclusive: feeling that no one understands, no one cares

Controlled by people's opinion: needs desperately approval from others

Despair in trouble: sees difficulty as pay-back from God.

3. Are you (a) partially (b) halfway or (c) primarily operating out of a fear-based slave mentality?
4. Share a situation-past, present, or future-where the "slave" mentality became a particular problem for you. How were you able to overcome it?
5. Discuss the "down-stroke" (repentance) and "up-stroke" (faith) dynamic mentioned in the article and how you could put it to work in your daily life?

Applying

Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week

Living as a child of God Project

Project No 8

Christians with a "slave" mentality are locked into "the left turn" pattern of trying to obey the external law in order to earn God's acceptance. Such a pattern cannot produce what the law of God is really after—a heart overflowing with the fruit of the Spirit. Unless we are deeply convinced that we are adopted children of God, we will be filled with drivenness, defensiveness, self-pity and discouragement. We will wonder why we are so unhappy in all our Christian activity.

This week and certainly in the weeks to come you are going to begin the process of living out your identity as a child.

1. During the week take the time to think about your own attitudes. Are you still living under the old tyrant? Look at the descriptions below. Which are true of you?

A child of God is:	not driven	but at peace.
	not defensive	but quick to repent.
	not self-absorbed	but warm and open to others.
	not cowardly	but independent with integrity,
	not despairing,	but given to hope and patience,

2. List two or three of your significant besetting sins – character flaws, attitudes, self-control problems (example: always justifying myself, angry or always having to be right).
3. How do these attitudes and sins stem from a failure to grasp that you are an adopted child of God?
4. List a responsibility or duty which makes you anxious or fearful or angry or depressed. Write below what goes on in your heart and what should go on in your heart.

Slave motivation

Son-ship motivation

During your small group, discuss the results of your week. Are you living as a slave or as a child? Talk about how this affects your intimacy with God and your prayer life.

Write a letter addressed to "Dear Abba." Bring the letter and share it with the group.