



Nowadays, people talk a lot about privilege – advantages people get because of their identity. People can be privileged because of their ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and other factors.

This subject of privilege is quite divisive, and people can become quite defensive. People don't like to be called privileged because it means that they enjoy benefits they didn't earn. They got them simply because of their identity.

But if we were to look at our lives through the lens of Scripture, we would see that we're all privileged to some degree – and Christians are the most privileged people of all. We enjoy astounding privileges and benefits both in this life and in the life to come, simply because of our identity in Christ. We did nothing to deserve them.

We should not be embarrassed about our privileges, but proud of them – not because of how great we are and what we have done, but because of how great God is and what he has done for us through the work of Christ on our behalf. The benefits of Jesus' work have been applied to us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That's the theme of Romans 8. Paul lists several privileges that believers enjoy in Christ. Last Sunday we considered three of them: No condemnation from God, the capacity to please God, and our coming resurrection by God – a privilege that Paul will explain more fully later in the chapter.

But first Paul wants us to know that our *future glory* is based on a *present reality*: our adoption by God. *Adoption* may be defined as “an act of God whereby he makes us members of his family.”<sup>1</sup>

***Adoption:***

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Paul talks about this amazing privilege in Romans 8:12-17:

<sup>12</sup> So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. <sup>15</sup> For you did not receive the

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), p. 913.

spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> 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.

This text teaches that the Holy Spirit assures believers that we are God’s children.

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In explaining this wonderful blessing, Paul emphasizes our *indebtedness* to God, our *dependence* on God, and our *adoption* by God. Let’s look at each point briefly.

**1. We are debtors to God, not to the flesh.**

That’s Paul’s point in verse 12: “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” Back in chapter one, Paul declared, “I am [a] debtor.” Here he says, “we are debtors,” referring to himself and to all believers in Christ.

He begins his statement with the words “So then,” referring to the privileges he has already mentioned: no condemnation from God, the capacity to please God, and our coming resurrection by God. Because all these privileges come from God, all of our praise goes to God. We are indebted to the God the Father for orchestrating our salvation, to God the Son for accomplishing our salvation through his death and resurrection, and to God the Holy Spirit for applying the work of Christ to us.

Each believer’s indebtedness to God is conveyed through Andraé Crouch’s song, “My Tribute,” or “To God Be the Glory.” Crouch wrote,

How can I say thanks for the things You have done for me?  
Things so undeserved, yet You gave to prove Your love for me.  
The voices of a million angels could not express my gratitude –  
All that I am and ever hope to be, I owe it all to Thee.

To God be the glory, to God be the glory, to God be the glory  
For the things He has done –  
With His blood He has saved me  
With His power He has raised me  
To God be the glory for the things He has done.

That’s the song of the Christian life. “We are debtors, but not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh” (Rom. 8:12). “The flesh,” i.e., our sinful nature has done nothing but ruin us, but God has mercifully redeemed us. We owe the flesh nothing, but we owe God everything. So, Scripture calls us to live accordingly. That’s the first principle. The second is this:

## 2. We must depend on the Spirit, not on ourselves.

Verse 13: “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.” The death described here is not merely physical death, since verses 10-11 tell us that even those with the Spirit will experience physical death. The death spoken of here for those who live according to the flesh is *spiritual* death. Paul already stated in verse 6, “For to set the mind on the flesh is death.” Likewise, in Romans 6:23 we’re told, “The wages of sin is death.”

Last week we read about the Final Judgment in Revelation 20, which closes with these sobering words: “This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (vv. 14b-15). The apostle John, who recorded this vision that God gave him of the Final Judgment, also wrote the most beloved verse in the Bible – John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John then immediately goes on to say,

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.<sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

- John 3:17-18

John then concludes chapter three of his Gospel by declaring,

Whoever **believes** in the Son has **eternal life**; whoever does **not obey** the Son shall not see life, but the **wrath of God** remains on him.

- John 3:36

This verse reveals a direct link between *believing* and *obeying*. *Our pattern of life is proof of our faith*. That’s why Paul says in Romans 8:13, “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” That’s the good news. Stated negatively as a warning, it would be: *Kill sin, or sin will kill you*. The only way to kill sin is by the power of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 6 tells us to “take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit” (vv. 17-18). That’s the key to victory. We must depend on the Spirit, not on ourselves.

Most of us agree on this point, but we gloss over it too quickly. Underneath our war with sin is a more subtle struggle – the fight to accept our own finitude. In his new book, *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News*, Kelly Kapic writes, “when we run into our inevitable limits, we often hang on to the delusion that if we just work harder, if we simply squeeze tighter, if we become more efficient, we can eventually regain control.”<sup>2</sup> Christian blogger Tim Challies, in his review of Kapic’s book, writes,

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<sup>2</sup> Cited by Tim Challies, “You’re Only Human,” Challies.com, 11 February 2022 [online].

There is something deep in the heart of humanity that prompts us to rebel against our finitude, against the reality that we are dependent creatures who cannot exist for a day, or even a moment, apart from God. The very first sin was a rebellion against limits God had imposed on humanity and in some way that was the prototype for every sin that has followed. But what if we were to see that dependency upon God is a gift, not a deficiency? What if we were to go farther and actually embrace our limits and thank God for them, then live at peace with all the things we cannot do and cannot be?<sup>3</sup>

Kapic writes, “God made us to be limited creatures, able to freely participate in his work, confident in his presence, and grateful for his promises and provision. Let us appreciate the goodness of our finitude as we rest in the love and provision of our infinitely good God.”<sup>4</sup>

That captures the essence of what it means to live by the Spirit. If we depend on him rather than ourselves, then we will experience the blessings of God’s presence, his promises, and his provision.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

- Romans 8:14

Each Sunday see parents walking into church with their children and walking out of church with their children (hopefully not until the service is over!). Even when I meet folks for the first time, I’m usually able to tell who their children are, because they’re with their parents. They’re led by their parents. The same is true of God’s children.

This takes us to the third point, which is the most amazing and encouraging of all. Not only are we as believers *indebted* to God and *dependent* on God, but we are also *adopted* by God.

### **3. We are adopted by God and are therefore heirs.**

Continuing on in verse 15, Paul says, “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 of slavery” refers to the time when we feared death because we were convicted of our sin and were afraid of condemnation. Slavery to sin brings slavery to fear, but God through Christ delivers us from both. The Holy Spirit assures us that believers are no longer under condemnation but are in fact God’s children.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

But adoption is not the same thing as justification. Sinclair Ferguson does a great job explaining the difference between the two aspects of salvation in his book, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction*. Ferguson says,

Undoubtedly the New Testament never separates justification and adoption, but neither does it confuse them. In human terms it is quite possible to imagine a man being justified without the remotest thought of his being adopted. The fact that a judge pronounces the verdict of “not guilty” does not commit him to take the accused to his home and allow all the privileges of his son! Few men would strive for a place on the bench under those circumstances!<sup>5</sup>

But this is exactly what God has done for all who trust in Christ for salvation! Not only are we not condemned by God, but we have also been adopted by God! “No other religion teaches its adherents to think or speak of God as Father.”<sup>6</sup>

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus assured his disciples that after his departure, the Holy Spirit would come. Then Jesus said,

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

- John 14:18

That is, when the “Spirit comes, he will come in all the grace of Jesus himself.” The Spirit will also Jesus’ followers that they have a Father in heaven who cares for them.<sup>7</sup> What Jesus had taught them in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:5-14, 25-32) they will now experience through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

“By whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:15b). “Abba” is the Greek translation of an Aramaic term that conveys relational intimacy by a father’s children of all ages, both young and old. But as James Barr points out in the *Journal of Theological Studies* (vol. 39, 1988), *Abba* “was not a childish expression comparable with ‘Daddy’: it was a more solemn, responsible, adult address to a Father” (p. 46).<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the experience that Paul is describing here is not a “tranquil resting in the presence of God.”<sup>9</sup> No doubt there are times that the Holy Spirit blesses us with such an experience. But that’s not what this verse is describing. The word “cry” is *krazō*, which denotes a loud cry, often one of anguish. I came across this yesterday when reading the account of the crucifixion in Mark 15. Verse 37 says,

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<sup>5</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989, reprinted 2001), p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Romans*. Reformed Expository Commentary, eds. Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021), pp. 264-265.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Cited by Glenn Stanton, “FactChecker: Does ‘Abba’ Mean ‘Daddy’?” The Gospel Coalition, 13 May 2013 [online]. Retrieved on 12 February 2022 at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-does-abba-mean-daddy/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, 100.

“And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed his last.” Verse 39 says, “So when the centurion, who stood opposite [facing] Him, saw that He cried out [*krazō*] like this and breathed His last, he said, ‘Truly this Man was the Son of God!’” (NKJV).

So, the picture in Romans 8:15 is not of the believer resting in his Father’s arms but of one who is crying out in pain even as Jesus did – not only from Calvary but also in Gethsemane when Jesus prayed, “*Abba*, Father! All things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” This was a cry of anguish, yet one of total trust in the Father.

That kind of cry in the life of a Christian “is the mark of the presence of the Spirit of adoption ... because it shows that in time of need it is towards our Father in heaven that we look.”<sup>10</sup> I think that’s what Paul means when he says in verse 16, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” This probably refers not so much to “a mystical inner voice which speaks comfort and assurance to the believer,” as it does in our experience of the other evidences of sonship that Paul has already presented in the preceding verses, namely, *killing sin* knowing it displeases our Father, and *being convinced of his care* in times of need. These are the ways in which “the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” We *kill sin*, and we *cry out to God* in prayer.

Verses 15-16 confirm that believers are children of God. Verse 17 conveys the inheritance that goes along with that reality. The first part of the verse says,

And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God’s glory....

- Romans 8:17 NLT, ESV

Being adopted into God’s family “brings privileges that boggle the mind. All God’s children are heirs of God.... All that the Father has is ours. We have not yet come into full possession of all of it, but nothing can prevent our doing so in the future.”<sup>11</sup>

Well, actually, there is one condition attached to receiving the inheritance, and Paul tells us what it is in the last part of verse 17: “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” Believers cast in their lot with Jesus Christ, and there’s a cost that comes with that. But we can be sure that in the end, it will be worth it. Second Timothy 2:12 says, “If we endure, we will also reign with him.”

Our endurance is evidence of our sonship. It’s proof that we’re part of God’s family. And this privilege of adoption is all owing to God’s grace through Jesus our Lord. All who believe in him and receive him, are given the right to become children of God. What a glorious privilege! That’s why the apostle John writes in his first epistle, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1 NIV).

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), p. 1711.