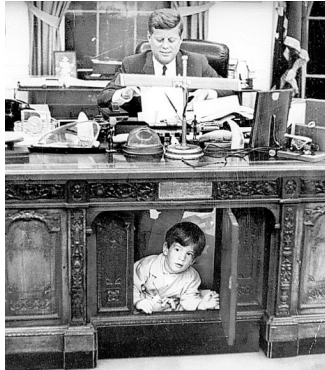


Our Freedom as “Sons”
Galatians 4:1-7



This is a famous picture of JFK sitting at the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office. That's John Jr. playing underneath the desk. The photo was reportedly taken at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. People love this photo for lots of reasons. I love it because here you have one of the most powerful people in the world involved in life-or-death decisions, but his son, John Jr., is playing under the desk without a worry in the world. Many, many influential people have never set foot inside the Oval Office, but John Jr. had the freedom to be there simply because he was the president's son.

This photo illustrates the access and the freedom that a son has to his father. Today we're going to consider a passage that speaks of believers in Jesus Christ as "sons" of God. This designation may sound strange to your ears if you're a girl or a woman – just as the church being called "the bride of Christ" sounds strange in the ears of men. Paul uses the term "sons" because of the connotations that term had in first-century Roman culture. The most important connotation about a "son" wasn't his gender but his status. In that culture, a son had full access and full freedom to his father.

In Galatians 4:1-7 Paul urges the Galatians to experience fully their status as sons of their heavenly Father. They should think of themselves as sons (not slaves); and they should therefore relate to God as their Father. I'll give an explanation of this passage and then we'll talk about our sonship from a couple of different perspectives.

In verses 1 through 3 Paul describes the way people related to God the Father under the Old Covenant. He begins with an analogy.

1 Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father.

Paul has us imagine a child who is technically an heir to his father's entire estate. One day he will inherit everything that his father has: property, houses, everything in the bank, the family business. . . everything. But until that day set by his father, that child is no different than a slave. He doesn't have any authority or power over the estate. As a matter of fact, his father has appointed "guardians and managers" who have authority ***over him***. In verse 3 Paul says that that's the exact situation in which he and fellow Jews found themselves when they were under the Law:

3 So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.

Paul is probably referring to the Law when he speaks of “the elemental things of the world.” The term Paul uses here refers to the most basic, foundational components of something. If you’re talking about a language, the elemental things would be the alphabet. If you’re talking about mathematics, the elemental things would be numbers. And if you’re talking to Jews about a relationship with God, the elemental things would be the regulations of the Law.

Just as a child is no different than a slave until the date set by his father, so too Paul and other Jews were “held in bondage” as long as they were under the Law. They were certainly “children of God,” but like the child in Paul’s analogy they were severely restricted in that relationship. This is what Brian described last week in 3:24 when Paul wrote that the Law was a tutor/pedagogue until the time of Christ. Under the Law, you didn’t enjoy full freedom in your relationship with God.

Living under the Law was never meant to be an oppressive, joyless experience. In Romans 7 Paul wrote that the Law is good and holy (Romans 7:12, 16). But living under the Law had very significant limitations; you were a lot like a child who would one day inherit everything – but who presently had no more authority and freedom than a slave.

Verses 4 and 5 explain that everything changed when Jesus arrived.

4 But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

The “fulness of time” is analogous to “the date set by the father” in verse 2 – the date when the child would inherit everything. We now know that that date came a little over 2,000 years ago. When the fulness of time came, “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.” The gospel of Luke describes how Jesus was “born of a woman.” Mary was astonished when the angel from God arrived and announced that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her and she would bear a son who “will be called the Son of the Most High” and who would reign on the throne of David forever (Luke 1:31-35). Because Jesus was “born of a woman” He was fully human; He could therefore identify with humanity and pay for the sins of humanity.

He was also “born under the Law, in order that we might redeem those who were under the Law.” Historically, He was born during the time when the Law still defined the Jews’ relationship with God. Mary and Joseph fulfilled everything that the Law required when Jesus was born (circumcision, bringing sacrifices to the temple, etc.). More significantly, being born under the Law ***Jesus fulfilled everything that the Law required of Him!*** Jesus summarized the Law as “love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” Because Jesus perfectly embodied this love for God and love for neighbor, He was qualified to redeem those who were born under the Law (i.e., Jesus “bought them out of slavery”).

Paul adds at the end of verse 5 “that we might receive the adoption as sons.” Those who have been bought out of slavery now have the full status of sons. This status isn’t something you can

ever earn or deserve; it is simply part of your status and identity in Christ. In verse 6 Paul describes how God gives us an experiential confirmation of our sonship.

6 And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

Did you notice how the Holy Spirit is described in verse 6? He is called "the Spirit of [God's] Son." God has "sent forth" the very same Spirit who empowered and indwelt Jesus – *the* Son of God – into our hearts. Remember that the heart is the "command and control center" of a person's life; we live from the heart. Out of the heart flow our thoughts and words and actions. That's where God has sent the Spirit of His Son! Into the very command and control center of our lives. From the depths of our hearts, the Spirit cries out (and prompts us to cry out), "Abba! Father!" Abba is an Aramaic word (Aramaic is the language Jesus would have spoken). A child would have used this term in addressing his father – roughly equivalent to the term "daddy." The Spirit of Jesus gives us the same experience of sonship that Jesus had/has with His Father.

Paul is describing the experiential confirmation that we are sons of God. We are no longer held in bondage and restricted in our relationship with God. The Spirit confirms that we have the full status and the full freedom that Jesus has. Hear Paul's intensity in verse 7:

7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

Paul wanted the Galatians to know and experience God as their Father. His fear was that they would continue living as slaves when God had given them full sonship. His fear was that they would have a very superficial, limited relationship with God when they could have the same freedom that Jesus had/has. And so Paul tells them straight up, "You are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God." In light of the analogy Paul used in verses 1 through 3, I think Paul is saying that since the fulness of time has come, they now have the status of sons who have already inherited everything. Paul expressed a similar truth in Ephesians 1 when he wrote that in Christ we have already been given "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3).

In response to this passage, I'd like us to think about our sonship from two different perspectives – ours and God's.

Do I think of myself as a "son" (and not a slave)? I have to admit that thinking of myself as God's son isn't incredibly natural for me. When I read that God is my heavenly Father, I'm not filled with an intuitive understanding of what that means. I really think it goes back to my relationship with my earthly father. For a variety of reasons, my dad wasn't around the house much. He was off being a pastor, pursuing business ventures, and hanging out with his friends. I really don't have many negative memories of my dad; I just don't have many memories period. Until a couple of years ago I thought that was normal.

Consequently, my natural tendency as a son *of God* was to think that God is out there being God (doing whatever God does), and I'm here living my life the best I can. I had very little understanding that I'm supposed to live my life *in* His presence *as* His son. After all, what

would a father want to do with his son anyway? Spiritually I've spent much of my Christian life feeling alone. I haven't been alone, but that's the way I've often felt.

But what verse 6 tells me, and what I've begun to experience, is that the Spirit of God within me is continually crying out "Abba! Father!" If I pay attention, I will recognize in everyday life ways that the Spirit is prompting me to think of myself as a son of God. For example, as a pastor, I've often felt like I was producing sermons on my own week after week. But God gave me a picture that really changed everything. Just like I might be out in the workshop with my son (showing him how to do something), when I'm preparing a message it's like I'm a son in a workshop with *my* Dad. He's got all this skill and insight that He'd love to impart to me. I'm really not alone in this work He's given me to do. I could multiply the examples.

How about you? Do you think of yourself as a "son" – someone who has full freedom and access to your heavenly Father? Next week we'll talk more about the other option – having the mindset of a slave. Basically if you think of yourself as a slave, you view God as a harsh taskmaster. You're not thinking about a relationship of give-and-take with Him; you're mainly trying not to mess up. But that's next week.

This morning ask yourself, "Do I think of myself as a 'son' – as someone who has the same freedom and access to God that Jesus had?" It almost sounds too good to be true, but that's exactly what Paul urged upon the Galatians; that is exactly what God is urging upon us.

The second question has us consider the same issue from God's point of view.

Do I allow God to be a good Father to me? One mark of spiritual maturity involves looking at our lives from God's point of view instead of merely from our own limited point of view. This question has us consider how deeply God wants to relate to us as our heavenly Father. God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying out "Abba! Father!" because ***He wants to be a good Father to His children.*** We are robbing Him of that satisfaction when we don't think of ourselves as sons.

When I think back to my childhood, I have to admit that I normally "hid" from my dad; I didn't feel the freedom to talk with him about important things. As I think about it, I realize that I kept my distance from my dad because I made all sorts of assumptions about him. I was afraid of the way he might react if he knew what I was struggling with and oblivious to the fact that he had all sorts of wisdom that could have saved me lots of heartache. Those assumptions effectively shut him out of much of my life.

When I fast-forward things 30 years, I realize that at different times my children have probably done the same thing. Perhaps they've made assumptions about how I might react to things they're going through; perhaps I've reacted to things in the past in ways that make them keep their distance. Perhaps they don't always realize how awesome I am.

What I'm saying is that a father is limited by his children's willingness to let him into their lives. In theory you might be the best dad in the world, but if your children don't want what you have to offer, you will be very limited in what you can give them. Paul wanted the Galatians to know

that God sent the very Spirit of His Son into our hearts because God wants to relate to us as a Father.

Jesus, of course, taught the same thing. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus tried to convince His disciples that God is the type of Father who loves for His children to come to Him for help. These may be familiar words, but listen to how Jesus is trying to convince the disciples to allow God to be the good Father He wants to be in their lives.

7 "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. 8 "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. 9 "Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? 10 "Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? 11 "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

There is no reason for you to keep your distance from your heavenly Father. It doesn't matter whether you're flying high or feeling crummy. Any good father would tell you that he wants his children to come close when they're doing well and when they're struggling. The parable of the prodigal son made clear that God welcomes us back when we've run far from home; and when we've stayed home but kept our distance (like the elder brother), God invites us to come close anyway. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Believe Me when I tell you that God is the type of Father who loves to give good gifts to His children."

Believing in Jesus includes believing that you have the freedom and the access of a son. It means accepting that you *aren't* like a child who's no different than a slave. It means letting God be a good Father to you in any and every circumstances. As Paul wrote in verse 7: "you are no longer a slave, but a son."