



## Sermon Transcript

### May 9, 2021

## 50 Days of Spiritual Growth

### Children of God

#### Romans 8:12-25

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 9, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com)

**Sermon Text**  
**Romans 8:12-25**

**12** So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. **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. **14** For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. **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! **16** The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, **17** 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.

**18** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. **19** For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. **20** For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope **21** that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. **22** For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. **23** 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. **24** For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? **25** But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

## Introduction

What is “new” about the New Testament? The Bible is divided into two sections: Old Testament and New Testament. So, what is so “new” about the New Testament? Sinclair Ferguson answers this question by saying: “You cannot open the pages of the New Testament without realizing that one of the things that makes it so “new”, in every way, is that here men and women call God ‘Father’.”<sup>1</sup> While it is very rare to find God referred to as “Father” in the Old Testament, you find over 200 references to God as such in the New Testament. It is how Jesus taught us to approach God when we pray, “*Our Father, which art in heaven . . .*” This is “new”, this is different from how we find God portrayed in the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, God is predominantly portrayed as being *holy* and therefore separate. His covenant name, *Yahweh . . . I AM* conveys his greatness and his majesty. No one caused God to be. God is from everlasting to everlasting, while man is like the grass, here today and gone tomorrow. God is distinct and set apart from all that he has made. He is to be revered. The essence of religion in the Old Testament is summed up with the phrase, “*the fear of the LORD*” which emphasized the vast difference and separation there is between man and God. This is not to suggest that the God of the Old Testament is a different God than the God of the New Testament. God is still holy and we are still called to reverence him as such. He is still the God “*which art in heaven.*” But J. I. Packer is quick to point how God is portrayed in the New Testament. He says, “But something has been added. A new factor has come in. New Testament believers deal with God as their Father . . . And the stress of the New Testament is not on the difficulty and danger of drawing near to the holy God, but with the boldness and confidence with which believers can approach him.”<sup>2</sup> God is our Father and we are his children, *sons of God*. This is what Paul says of God in our passage this morning.

This is no small thing. This is huge! Sinclair Ferguson said that our adoption as sons of God is “at the heart of understanding the Christian life.”<sup>3</sup> This is what ought to be on the tip of your tongue when asked to describe your relationship with God. We are children of God! That is “who” we are. God is our Father! Packer said, “If you want to understand 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 . . . everything that makes the New Testament new is summed up in the Fatherhood of God. ‘Father’ is the Christian name for God.”<sup>4</sup>

This is something Paul makes much of in Romans 8. Several times in our passage this

morning he refers to our *adoption as sons* and that we are *children of God*. Last week we zeroed in on the statement at the beginning of Romans 8, “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” Understandably, this is a statement that brings a lot of peace and confidence to our hearts. I can see it in your facial expression whenever I ask you to say it along with me. But as great as it is to know that we are fully pardoned of our sin through Jesus, the truth we are looking at this morning ought to cause you to smile even more so. The benefit that we are the *children of God* is a greater benefit than the forgiveness of our sin because it speaks to relationship with God. We have not just received the legal declaration of pardon. We have been brought into the family of God. It is closeness. It is deep affection.

## 50 Days of Spiritual Growth

Lets remind ourselves where we are in our **50 Days of Spiritual Growth**. From Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday, we have been making our way through Romans 6 -8. We have been looking at what Paul has to say about living the Christian life. We have been looking at the doctrine of sanctification; how God changes our lives and makes us to look more and more like Jesus in the way we live.

In Romans 6 we discovered that when you put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, you are brought into a new way of life. Just as Jesus rose from the dead, we too have been raised to a new life. We ought to “consider it so.” We ought to be able to say like we have said several times in this series, “I am not what I used to be.” And yet, as we turned to Romans 7, we also know that we still have a lot of room to grow. We still struggle with the sin that dwells within us. We have that tendency to find ourselves jumping back into the ditch. It frustrates us. You can hear Paul’s personal frustration over his own struggle with sin when he cries out, “*Wretched man that I am!*” The point Paul is making in Romans 7 is that we cannot defeat sin in our lives through our own power. Just like we are saved by grace through faith, God grows us through his grace. And so when we turn the page to Romans 8, we are assured that in our struggle with sin, we are not alone. We have power to overcome our sin. We have the Holy Spirit, mentioned nineteen times in Romans 8.

Last week we began a four week journey through Romans 8. In Romans 8:13 Paul says, “*by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body.*” In other words, what you are powerless to do in yourself (Romans 7), you have the power to do through the Holy Spirit. That sounds good and it sound promising. But how? How do I avail myself of the power of the Holy Spirit so that I might become more like Jesus?

The answer, we discovered last week, is that we need to “mind the Spirit.” Paul says in Romans 8:5, “*those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.*” The word translated *set their minds* is a verb that literally calls us *to mind* the Spirit. That means that we are to be preoccupied with the things that preoccupy the mind of the Spirit. Our imaginations are to be caught up with the things that catch the imagination of the Holy Spirit.

It is the same thing we find in our passage this morning. In Romans 8:14 Paul talks about being *led by the Spirit*. When we hear that phrase, *led by the Spirit*, we tend to think of the many ways the Holy Spirit prompts us to do something or to say something. We might say, “I felt led of the Spirit to call you. Are you alright?” It is always amazing to discover how often there was good reason the Spirit led you to do that. While that is one way to talk about the leading of the Holy Spirit, that is not what it means here to be *led by the Spirit*. Here it means “to mind the Spirit.” Here it means “to have the same basic orientation of your life determined by the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> This is how *by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body*. You hate the things the Spirit hates (sin) and you love the things the Spirit loves (Christ).<sup>6</sup> You are preoccupied with what preoccupies the mind of the Spirit. You are *led by the Spirit*.

It is the same thing Paul is saying in the next verse, Romans 8:15, when he refers to the “*Spirit of adoption as sons.*” We will look at what that means in a moment. But Sinclair Ferguson said that, “the ministry of the Spirit of adoption is the deep seated persuasion that we really are the sons of God.”<sup>7</sup> Are you captivated by this truth? When this truth settles deep within our hearts and minds it enables us to live in the joy of this truth. This becomes the power that the Spirit supplies to help us put to death the deeds of the body.

So in Romans 8 we are uncovering five things that preoccupy the mind of the Spirit and need to preoccupy our minds as well.

- There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ
- The Holy Spirit dwells in us
- We are children of God
- All things work together for good to those who love God
- Nothing can separate me from the love of God

It is interesting how these truths in Romans 8 mirror the four statements we have been rehearsing through this series. These four affirmations are how we mind the things of the Spirit. These four affirmations help us to preoccupy our minds with the things that preoccupy the mind of the Spirit, thus giving us the power over sin in our lives.

- I am accepted in Christ (no condemnation)
- I am free from the power of sin (Romans 6-8)
- I am not alone, I have the indwelling Holy Spirit (Romans 8)
- I have authority over the kingdom of darkness (put to death the deeds of the body)

With this in mind this morning, I want us to be preoccupied with what it means for us to *receive the Spirit of adoption as sons . . . children of God*. We need to “mind” this truth and let it settle down in our hearts. It is at the core of what makes the New Testament “new.” It is at the core of what makes you and me “new.”

### How Deep the Father’s Love

Our passage tells us that we have been adopted into the family of God as sons. Keep in mind that Paul is writing to the church in Rome. Adoption was not really a Jewish practice, but it was common in the Roman world. And yet, the purpose for adoption in the Roman world was a little different than the way we observe and practice adoption in our country. In the Roman world, adoption usually occurred because a wealthy adult was lacking an heir. In that situation, it was not uncommon for him to adopt a child, or a youth or even more often an adult who would then become his legal son and the heir of his estate. Because under Roman law, women had very little rights or the ability to inherit fortunes, there is very little record of women or girls having been adopted. So when Paul talks about *the adoption as sons* this would be readily recognized, rather common and understood in the Roman world.

In our Way of Life here at WEFC, we readily say that we are “sons and daughters deeply loved by God.” And in our passage this morning, Paul uses the gender neutral term *children of God* three times while at the same time referring to us being *sons of God* four times. Perhaps as a woman or a female, you may resent being called a *son of God*. You would rather be called a “daughter” or a *child of God*. But there is something being conveyed in the word *son* that would be lost if you just used the phrase *children of God*. Paul is going to make much of the fact that because we are *sons of God* through adoption, we are also heirs. And you can say, that he is being subversive here, counter-cultural, by taking a male only institution and applying it to both men and women who are in Christ. In Christ, women are full heirs—sons of God. Tim Keller says that “Christian women should not resent being called “sons” anymore than Christian men should resent being called part of the bride of Christ.”<sup>8</sup> The title *sons of God* conveys something about our relationship with God.

But I don't think the Roman practice of adoption is the only influence behind calling us *sons of God*. I can't think of this title without thinking of Jesus, the Son of God. And immediately, this puts us into the mystery of the deep love that God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have known for all of eternity. Jesus talks about the love he has known and shared with the Father in John 17. It is a love, Jesus says, that he has known before the foundation of the world as the eternal Son of God. As Jesus is getting ready to go to the cross, he prays for us. He prays that the love that he and the Father have enjoyed for all of eternity would now be shared with us. As *sons of God* we are brought into the deep love that the Father has for the eternal Son of God.

By its very nature, adoption is the free kindness of the one doing the adoption. But unlike Roman adoption where the one doing the adopting might be looking for the one most qualified to manage his estate, there was nothing in us that made us worthy to be called *sons of God*. It was the free love of God extended to us that is at the heart of our adoption. And so John says, *Behold, what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God*. It sounds rather ludicrous and it sounds rather wild that the same love that the Father has for the Son is the same love that the Heavenly Father has for those who are sons of God. John says in John 1:12, *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* I love what John says 1 John 3:2. He says, *"Beloved, we are God's children now."* It is as if John is saying that it sounds too good to be true. But it is true. You "mind the Spirit" when you are preoccupied with this thought that you are a *son of God . . . a child of God*. God has given himself to us as our Father.

I saw a story this week of a nineteen year old who spent most of her life moving through the foster care system. And now that she was an adult, she was being released from the system that helped raise her. But she had no family to be released to. Her case worker for the past six years, had worked closely with her and they had formed a deep bond together. Now that this young lady was out of the system, the case worker was able to legally adopt her. It was moving to watch them fall into each other's arms when they were legally declared to be mother and daughter—family. That is but a small glimpse of the kind of love God the Father extends to us.

I think of the story of the Prodigal Son. After squandering his father's estate and coming to the end of his rope, he decides to go back to his father, hoping to be received not as a son, but one of his dad's servants. He rehearsed what he was going to say to his father when he returned. *"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."* But

before he can even get a word out, his father runs to him and embraces him as his son. At times, you may be hanging out in Romans 7 and digging yourself out of that ditch wondering how God could still love you. You need to “mind the Spirit” and be preoccupied with your adoption as a son of God and God’s deep love for you.

As the hymn says:

How deep the Father’s love for us?  
How vast beyond all measure?  
That he should give his only Son  
To make a wretch his treasure

How great the pain of searing loss?  
The Father turns his face away  
As wounds that mars the Chosen One  
Bring many sons to glory

## How Great Our Joy

This leads to great joy because we are invited into the intimacy of God’s love. Look what Paul says in verse 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!”* That word *Abba* has nothing to do with a 70’s rock band from Australia. But it is a pretty amazing word. It is a term of intimacy. It is the expression of a child that calls his father, “daddy.” Can we really refer to God with such intimate—casual language?

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus responded by saying; *“When you pray, say: Father . . .”* I wonder how startling that might have been for the disciples steeped in Old Testament thoughts about God. Like we said at the beginning of the sermon, this is what is “new” about the New Testament. God is our Father. But Paul takes it to another level by telling us that when we grasp the essence of our adoption our relationship with the holy Creator is expressed with such intimate terms like *Abba*—“papa” or “daddy.” At his greatest moment of need, in the Garden before he went to the cross, Jesus cried out in Mark 14:36, *“Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”* And so, once again, this cry of intimacy invites us into the tone of our relationship with God that empowers us to live out our Christian life. It is a deep and intimate love.

Notice how Paul says that we *did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,*



*but you have received the Spirit of the adoption as sons.*” Which “spirit” governs how you view God in the living out of your Christian life? Do you easily slip back into a spirit of “slavery” and “fear” or do you rest in the sonship and the love God has for you? I think it is easy for us to slip back into a spirit of fear and slavery.

There was a discipleship program developed by a church near where I used to pastor in the Philadelphia area. The program was called *Sonship*. The goal of the program was to teach you how to “mind the Spirit” in this regard and to live in the freedom that comes in knowing your sonship. Here is a testimony from one of the ladies who went through this program. It was her testimony of how easily she slipped back into a spirit of fear when it came to her relationship with God her Father. She realized that her greatest sin was unbelief—not really believing the love of God for her.

She told the story of an early encounter she had with her earthly father that she ended up projecting onto her relationship with her heavenly Father. When she was a little girl, she saw her older sister hanging her father’s white business shirts onto the clothesline. Out of love for her father, she wanted to help. Since she was too little to reach the clothes line, she took one of his wet white dress shirts and pinned it to the rusty metal handle bars of the wheelbarrow near her. This joyful expression of love was received rather harshly from her father after seeing that his good shirt was ruined with a permanent rust stain. During the conference, she realized that this experience had a profound impact on how she approached her heavenly Father. She said that her entire Christian life was “oppressive.” She said, “I did not know how to live day by day without an overwhelming sense of failure to perform up to what I thought God demanded. With that came a sense of God being disappointed and even disgusted with me.” I think this feeling is more common than what we might think. Paul knows it because he is reminding us that we *did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear*. But often we do.

At the conference, this woman told her counselor that she was beginning to understand the *Spirit of adoption* and now she envisions God standing next to that rusty shirt and telling her to forget about it and that he loves her. The counselor said, “You still don’t understand fully.” He said, “God would not overlook the shirt, but take it, put it on, and wear it to work. And when someone commented on the rust marks, he would say, “Let me tell you about my little girl and how much she loves me.”<sup>9</sup> That is *the Spirit of adoption* we have through Christ. Let’s face it, we often get the shirt rusty in our attempts to serve God. But it is in knowing his love and delight in us, that we are freed to love. Our *sonship* enables us to take the talents that we have and to use them to serve God with great energy and great joy. He already loves us as his *sons*.

I love the introductory points for *Sonship*.

Cheer up! The Gospel is far greater than you can imagine!

Cheer up! You are worse than you think!

Cheer up! God's Spirit works in your weakness!

Cheer up! God's kingdom is more wonderful than you can imagine!<sup>10</sup>

Cheer up! You have been give the *Spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"* This is the foundation from which the Spirit empowers us to live out our faith.

## Our Certain Hope

Our adoption tells us that not only are we sons, children of God. But Paul says in verse 17, *and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ . . . that we may also be glorified with him*. We are going to pick up on this theme next week because this is the anchor of our hope in a world that is groaning. The world groans. We groan. In fact, we will see that the Holy Spirit even groans for us in our weakness. Paul says in verse 23 that we *groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons*. This is what enables us to wait for our inheritance with patience. The best is yet to come. Remember, the purpose of Roman adoption was to pass on the estate to son. Our Father's wealth is immeasurable. As *fellow heirs with Christ* the Father shares the entire estate with us. It is like what Paul says in the beginning of Ephesians. God has *blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*. Does this not "blow your mind?"

One of my favorite movies is a Clint Eastwood movie called *Gran Torino*. A little disclaimer, there is some pretty "salty" language in it, but the message is powerful. If you are looking for a good story to "curate your media" the story of this movie will do just that. Clint Eastwood's character is a blue collar "salty" character filled with prejudice towards his Asian neighbors. But through a series of events, he develops a liking for the daughter and the son of this Asian family as he is reluctantly pulled into the drama that comes into their lives through a local urban gang. At the same time, his own children and grandchildren are emotionally distant from him. At the end of the movie, after Clint Eastwood's character has died, the family is gathered before the lawyer to hear the will being read. The teenage boy next door was also asked to be present for the reading of the will. You can imagine the scene. The family was somewhat put out that this neighbor boy they didn't even know was even there. This was their family. This was their inheritance. The prized possession that everyone coveted was a vintage Gran Torino. It was the last thing the lawyer read in reading the will. And to the surprise of

everyone, Eastwood's character left the Gran Torino to this boy.

I thought about that this week as I considered the idea that we are *fellow heirs with Christ*. There is no reluctance on the part of the Father or the Son to share with us all that has been given to Jesus. Jesus is not looking at us and wondering why we are even there. Instead, unlike the older brother of the prodigal son, Jesus delights in sharing all of his glory with us.

We will look at this more next week, but once again, this is a picture of the incredible love the Father has shared with us in Christ. As children of God through the adoption as sons we share in this future and glorious inheritance.

## Conclusion

“Mind the Spirit” this week by being preoccupied with the thoughts the preoccupy the mind of the Spirit. *“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”* Because of this, we are deeply loved. We serve God with great joy. We have a certain hope, an inheritance that will never fade. This is ours in Christ. This is what empowers us by the Spirit to walk in the newness of life. God is our Father.

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<sup>1</sup>Sinclair Ferguson *Children of the Living God* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1989) xi

<sup>2</sup>J. I. Packer *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 203

<sup>3</sup>Ferguson, 2

<sup>4</sup>Packer, 201

<sup>5</sup>Douglas Moo *Romans: The NIV Application Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 260

<sup>6</sup>Tim Keller *Romans 8-16 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015) 27

<sup>7</sup>Ferguson, 71

<sup>8</sup>Keller, 26

<sup>9</sup>Sonship (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2013) Workbook

<sup>10</sup>Ibid

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS



### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Fact: The average user streams over 500 hours of media a year.  
Question: What do you appreciate about how modern stories shape you?  
What concerns you about the way modern stories shape you?  
Habit: How do you want to “curate” your media intake this week?



### Diving Into The Word

2. Read Romans 8:12-25

What aspect of your adoption as sons of God thrills you?

What difference does the fact of your adoption make to your thoughts, your priorities, or your behavior?

Do you wrestle with a “spirit of slavery or fear” when it comes to how you feel God views you? How can you keep in mind the “Spirit of adoption?”

How are you growing in resemblance to Christ? How do you need to pray to do so more?

How will you remember your inheritance—the glory you are headed to?

How will your coming inheritance in Christ transform your view of your life?



### Taking It Home

3. How will you be careful this week to “mind the Spirit?”  
There is no condemnation for those in Christ  
The Holy Spirit dwells within you  
You are a child of God