

#22 One Gospel, One People— “Adopted” (2017.06.25)

For those of you who saw my post on the Keele Facebook page, I promised we would play a game today, and it may seem that I was strongly hinting that we would be playing Monopoly. But, you would be wrong. My use of the Monopoly graphic had to do with the subject of the card, and not with the fact that we were going to play Monopoly. Still, we have another game to play, one that sometimes takes much longer than Monopoly, if you can believe that! Today we are going to play a game of “what if?”.

The “what if” game can be played in an unending variety of ways but it always involves questions that begin with, “What if...?” “What if I got that job?” “What if I went to that school and studied *that* subject instead?” “What if I married *that* person instead?” or “What if I moved there instead?” There are lots of “what ifs”, but you get the point: we all have moments of reflection in which we contemplate how life might have been different if this or that didn’t happen.

Now, I am not one to play “what if” to be honest with you. I have a hard enough time keeping up with “what is!” But there is one “what if” that I have visited many times over the years.

I was 4 or 5, and my mom and dad, who I thought was my uncle at the time, (it is a long story), were fighting over me. I didn’t fully understand what the fight was about, but later on, I came to realize that my father wanted to take me away from my mom and ship me off to western Canada where my father’s brother lived on a farm. My dad, who had his own family, felt that I had a better chance growing up with a father and mother on a farm.

Now, I realize that whatever it is that I am today is the result of this particular event not happening, so it’s hard for me to evaluate what might have been. But, that doesn’t change the fact that growing up with a single mom wasn’t easy. I was left alone a lot, from the time I was five onward and even earlier than that! We were poor. We moved a lot, I went to a bunch of different schools growing up. It wasn’t easy.

That's why the thought of growing up on a farm out west, with a strong family life: a father and a mother, and a mother that probably stayed at home, would have completely changed my life. I would have felt safer, and far more settled and secure. It would have been a much more "stable" life for me. Get it? Farm ... "stable" see what I did there?

Would that completely different family have made me a completely different person? Maybe not completely different. Some constants remain in both scenarios, but I am confident that this different scenario presents a strong potential for me becoming a significantly different person.

I know, for many people, adoption has made an incredible difference in their lives. Jaime Cone in a lifestyle article in the New York times, wrote of her own realizations about adoption after she began to read some of the documents her adopted mother had collected over the years about her biological mother and the process they went through in order to adopt her. Jaime writes about reading through the documents for the first time:

The files contained a jumble of documents, many of them court papers about guardianship. Evidently my parents had spent a lot of time and energy trying to legally adopt me, and there were notes from caseworkers apologizing about delays and complications. There were also impersonal greeting cards my mother sent me with prayer cards tucked inside and an evaluation of my birth mother from a hospital stay when she was 15. Suffice it to say, she was troubled. A few months after I was born, a disposition report from a social worker contained the ominous statement: "The mother, at this point, is a dangerously inadequate custodian. Placement with mother is a threat to the child."

One court document described a particularly desperate night when she tried to give me away to an incredulous couple at a bar. Out of concern, they took me and called the police. I was taken into foster care, but the situation didn't improve;

one account of her behavior during a visit with me recounts her screaming at my temporary foster mother, pouring milk from my bottle over her head, and storming out of the house.

My birth mother died in 1986 on a dark roadway in Clarendon, Vt. A newspaper article stashed between court documents displays a photograph of a minivan with its hood caved in and windshield shattered. She died an unidentified white woman “in her mid-20s” according to the police, though she was actually 30.

A part of me hates the file and wishes it never existed. But some bits I treasure, and I read them over as a mental salve when the rest of it leaves me feeling depressed. Not only does it help me understand my parents’ attitude toward my biological family, it reminds me of how truly lucky I am: how my life could have been different had my adoptive parents not endured years of uncertainty and stressful battles in trying to legally make me their child.

Sprinkled throughout the documents are reminders of my parents’ dedication and how their love for me was obvious to everyone from the start. I found myself smiling when I read a report that said: “Present placement is very stable, safe, nurturing, warm and provides Jaime with a sense of permanency ... the current caretakers are very, very much interested in adoption if the child is freed.”

What might have been. “What if?”

Jamie’s “What if?” is something she doesn’t really want to revisit because she knows, without question, that her life was radically changed for the better when, at great pain and great cost, and great sacrifice, and perseverance, she was finally able to be adopted and became a part of this amazing, caring, loving new family. In Jamie’s case, “what if?” reminds

her of the blessings she would have missed if she hadn't been adopted. Her "what if?" made her thankful for what is!

Today we return to Romans 8 and we are going to be talking about the single greatest truth in every Christian's experience. When I begin to think about this truth, I immediately get frustrated because, I who sometimes have a way with words, have no words. Don't get excited, it doesn't make the sermon any shorter! The beauty, the love, and the hope conveyed by Paul in Romans 8:12-17, is enough to give us all a motivated, thankful, confidence in living our faith with great zeal and determination.

But, the tragedy is that Christians so often miss the profound truth of these verses. They live in the fear of Romans 7, instead of the security of Romans 8, and they miss out on the significance of what has already happened.

If we want to understand who a Christian is, and why being a Christian is a privilege, we need to appreciate what Paul shares with us in these verses. We need to begin to grasp the magnitude of Paul's grand statements and reflect on them until they do their intended work on our hearts.

Beginning with verse 12 we read: *"Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it."*¹³ *For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.*
(Romans 8:12-13)

Paul tells us we have an obligation. The Greek is literally, a "debt." There is something that is owed. Now what exactly do we owe? What kind of debt is it? Well, notice the "therefore" beginning verse 12, that means we have to go back to see what Paul is referring to about us having an obligation.

Well, in verses 10 and 11, Paul states, *"But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness."*¹¹ *And if*

the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.”

Paul has been talking about living in the Spirit. He has told us that if we are in Christ, we live under the realm or governing control and influence of the Holy Spirit. Which means we are no longer under the realm or governing control of the flesh. We are part of an entirely new humanity! We are no longer of Adam, we are of Christ.

And Paul tells us that the Spirit gives life. But we are also reminded that our new life is not completely free from the influence of the flesh. Our bodies are subject to death, because of sin. Our mortal bodies continue to be part of the ongoing struggle with temptation and sin, but we have victory and power and life because we are now under the freeing power of the Holy Spirit.

The point of what Paul is saying in verse 10 and 11 is simply this. The struggle will end. You have already won the war against sin because the new life you have now, in the Spirit, will completely swallow up everything affected, tainted, weakened and corrupted by sin in this world. One day, your mortal body will be transformed and given life, just as Christ was raised from the dead. In other words, one day your salvation will be completed. One day your sanctification will be done. One day, your new humanity will be move in ready and the struggle, the battle, the suffering will be over.

This is a future hope that will happen at the resurrection, but it has begun now. And because of that we have an obligation. We have a debt. In verse 17, Paul is going to tell us that we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. In other words, we have an inheritance.

In Romans 4 we are told that we share in Abraham’s inheritance which is the entire world, but here we are told that our inheritance is of God. Either our inheritance is God’s possessions, or it is God Himself! Just think of it! We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. Just try and wrap your head around this. In verses 10-11, Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit that

has already given us new life, will one day make that new life complete. Then even our bodies will be redeemed and our inheritance will be God.

This is our future that has already begun now. This is who we already are. This is what has already been given to us. This is our take-it-to-the-bank-promise. This is ours. It is not earned. It is not deserved. But freely given to us through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we have a debt. Therefore, we have an obligation.

And Paul says, that our debt isn't to the flesh, to live according to it. If our debt were to the flesh, then our future would be death, not life. "Death" in this context is more than physical death, since Paul has just talked about the fact that our mortal bodies are subject to death because of sin. This death is spiritual. It is the living of life outside of any thought or influence of God. It is life surrounded by and contained in death. But, our obligation, our debt is to the Spirit, and *"If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live."* This seems like a conditional statement, doesn't it? If you live by the flesh, the result is death. If, by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. Well it is a conditional statement and it reminds us of another conditional statement made to Israel.

"This day . . . I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Deut.30:19-20)

Notice that the context is the same. This is given in the context of an inheritance. It is given in the context of life lived in the Promise, before the Promise has been fully received. And there is a sense that the inheritance is similar: "For the LORD is your life." But, ultimately, this inheritance is only a shadow of the real deal that Paul is talking about in Romans 8. But, don't miss the point, in both cases we have God talking about what He has already given. And, in both cases God's people have a condition: they must choose life.

Well, does that mean that our salvation is conditional? Does that mean that we have to put to death the misdeeds of the body or we will die? Is it kill or be killed? Yes, but don't forget the context. The context is that we already have new life. The context is that we already have been given the Spirit. The context is that we are now under the power and the influence of the Spirit and one day that power and influence will completely redeem us. The context is what God has already done; not what we must do. It is actually similar in both contexts of Israel and those who are in Christ.

There is something very important for us to learn here because it can give us an insight into exactly what Paul is talking about in regards to the Christian life.

When we think of Israel's inheritance of the Promised Land, we clearly realize that they could only possess the land if they did it by faith, right? Is that not the lesson learned in the very first battle for the land? Jericho fell, not because of the efforts of Israel, it was by their trusting in the efforts of God alone. They worshipped, but God did all the heavy lifting. The battle was won by the Lord. That was a precedent set by God to point to how all the victories in the land would be made. But, having said that. If Israel understood this very clearly. If they understood that God needs to work in order for victory to happen and then they just worship and prayed and sat around on the other side of the Jordan until God conquered the Promise Land, they would still be waiting, would they not?

Do you see what I am getting at? Trusting in God. Living by faith, is a call to action, not inaction.

If that is the case, then why is it that so many Christians think they will receive their inheritance without any involvement in "taking the land" so to speak. Paul says, "take the land." "Put to death the misdeeds of the body" and you will live. But, he does it in the context of us having been given everything we need to succeed.

Let me ask you a question: What exactly is grace? We all agree that we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). We all agree, that this is a gift from God, it is not our own doing, so no one can boast. But what does Paul say immediately after that in Ephesians 2? *“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* (**Ephesians 2:10**) We are saved by grace through faith, but that new life, that new creation which is created in Christ Jesus has a purpose—to do good works.

So, grace isn’t just God working for us, grace is God working through us. We have to be willing participants, we have to, by faith, believe in our future inheritance.

So, when Paul says, *“if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.”* He isn’t saying, “live a perfect life or you are going to die and your salvation will be revoked.” No, he is saying, “You have an obligation. You have a debt. You have been given this this future. You have been given this new life. Use it. Take the land! Put to death the misdeeds of your body.” **Paul isn’t telling us what we have to do to be saved. He is telling us what we can do because we are saved!**

The image here is fairly grim. Kill or be killed. Put to death the misdeeds of your body. Notice that it is we who must do this. But don’t forget the context. We are only able to do this because of what God has already done in giving us new life. Grace gives us the power to accomplish what we could never do on our own, but God wants us to act in faith. He wants us to be involved. More importantly, He will not force us to do anything we don’t want to do. He does give us the power to do His will, but it must be our choice. We must want it and we must take it, but even in that, the fact that we want it and the fact that we can take it, is evidence of God’s gracious work in our lives.

The image that Paul gives us here is that, in a way, we are all zombies. Our spirits are alive but our bodies are the walking dead. And if we allow them to continue to walk around very slowly eating more and more flesh and brains, we are going to be in big trouble. Now if

you know anything about zombie, you can't just tell them to go away. They don't listen. Zombies don't make good neighbours. And even if you yell at them, or throw a rock at them, or hit them, none of that is going to work. You can even lop off a leg or two and they still keep trying to consume you. The only way you can deal with a zombie is to be decisive, and go for the head. We have to go for the kill shot. This may seem a bit graphic for you, but this is the kind of image that Paul is painting for us. In life and dead you do what needs to be done, otherwise our lives will be just about decay and stumbling about aimlessly, getting more and more crippled and broken.

This is the obligation we have. It is an obligation to move into the land we have been promised. It is an obligation to move into the life we have already been given. It is an obligation to use the power God has provided us through the Holy Spirit. It is the obligation to live in the reality of our new life in Christ.

OK, but why is this so important for us to understand? Well, **living our life obligated to what we have already received is entirely different than living our lives waiting for what we think we are owed.** If we live our lives thinking God owes us, sin is just going to fester and increase. Decay is going to take over. But, if we live life understanding all that we have already been given, then we not only have the capacity, but the desire to invest in our inheritance, which is all that Paul is asking us to do in this passage. We have been given complete redemption. We have been given new life, so invest in it. Show appreciation and gratitude for what you have already been given by taking hold of it with great energy and zeal.

Don't live your life thinking that God owes you. Live your life, knowing that you have an obligation, or a debt for what you have already been given. And, just so we are clear, this debt isn't a repayment. It isn't a loan we have to pay back. This debt is a debt of gratitude and love for a gift that has been given. It is a debt of living out and enjoying the freedom we already have. Our debt isn't to pay God back, it is to enjoy and live in our inheritance.

We need to keep moving. Picking things up in verse 14: *“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.”*¹⁵ *The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”*¹⁶ *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.*¹⁷ *Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

Paul says that those who are “led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.” As soon as we read, “led by the Spirit” we probably have all kinds of ideas jumping around in our heads that Paul didn’t intend. When we think of being “led by the Spirit” we think of some kind of mystical experience in which we have discerned the will of God for our lives, but that isn’t what Paul is talking about here. Notice the “for” that begins Paul’s thought. The “for” connects verse 14 back to verse 13. So, to be led by the Spirit is to put to death the misdeeds of the body and live. To be lead by the Spirit is to bear the fruit of the Spirit (**Gal 5:22-23**). To be lead by the Spirit is to live in the power and the victory that are ours in Christ. It is to move into our inheritance. Ultimately that is God’s will for our lives!

But, let’s not miss the point here. The main event is that we are children of God. Paul says that the Spirit brought about our adoption. This is such a powerful image. It is an image from the Old Testament. It speaks to us of the Exodus of Israel out of Egypt.

Think about it, just as we are lead by the Spirit, the Israelites were led by God himself, going with them in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. At various times, they wanted to give up and go back to Egypt, where they had been in slavery; but they clung on, despite rebellion, idolatry and a bunch of other problems. And, what began the whole process was the summons near the start of the book of Exodus: *“This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son”* (**Exodus 4:22**). And the point of the Exodus was that they would all arrive at their inheritance.

All this is behind the image Paul is using here, but instead of using children of God to refer to Israel, he is using it to refer to the New Israel, the Church, those who have placed their faith in Christ, both Jew and Gentile.

And then Paul moves on a concept that is Roman, which is that of adoption.

In Roman culture, the moment adoption occurred, several things were immediately true of the adopted child. First, his old debts and legal obligations were paid; second, he got a new name and was instantly heir of all the father had; third, his new father became instantly liable for all his actions (his debts, crimes, etc); but fourth, the new son also had new obligations to honour and please his father. All this lies behind the passage here.

Notice also, what we did not receive from the Spirit. The Spirit did not make us a slave again to fear. Instead we are adopted children. Instead we can cry out “Abba, Father.” We can cry out “daddy!” What a contrast.

I can’t help thinking of the contrast of Paul’s cry of *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?”* (**Romans 7:24**). And now the cry of “Abba, Father” that has replaced it. We are speaking about two very different lives here.

A slave has obligations and debts, but those obligations are not to love. They are to performance. They are, “Do the work or else!” They are obligations that are owing, but they are way too big to ever be repaid. We were doomed to the fear of never being good enough when we were trying to please God in our own efforts.

But now, we live as dearly loved children, adopted with every privilege, and our obligation isn’t to work off a debt we can’t pay, it is to be thankful to a loving Father whose adoption of us changed our lives forever! Our obligation now, as children, is to accept and grow into the inheritance He has already purchased for us. It is to believe that our lives really have changed. Our lives are now about where we are going, not where we have been.

Look at verse 16 for a moment because it is going to give us a clarity to this entire passage. Paul writes, *“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”*

Now there is some difficulty here in translating this verse. The Greek can either say, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit.” Or it can say, “The Spirit himself testifies to our spirits.” If it is “with”, then perhaps Paul has in mind the charge of God’s Word that any testimony must have at least two witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). If it “to” then the Holy Spirit’s presence and work in our lives prove to us that we are, in fact, children of God. Either way, the Spirit gives us assurance, and confidence in our new family.

If I had to choose, I would say that the Spirit testifies to our spirit, because our spirits don’t tend to be consistently confident enough about our standing before God to be a credible witness. We need the Spirit’s testimony more than the Father needs our testimony. But then again. The question becomes, how exactly does the Spirit testify to our adoption? It is by the Spirit’s leading into life. It is by putting to death the misdeeds of the body. If that is the case, then perhaps “with” is a better translation.

Either way, it is all good. Either way we have this wonderful image of God giving us assurance and security and safety in our new family. Either way, the meaning isn’t that different. Both ideas speak to the Spirit giving us assurance. And, assurance is what Romans 8 is all about. Romans 8 begins with “no condemnation” and it ends with nothing “separating us from the love of God.” And this is why we need to see that verse 16 gives us clarity to what Paul is saying.

When we read conditional statements like, *“If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the Body, you will live”* (v. 13). Or even verse 17 which says, *“Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”* We begin to doubt and wonder.

What if we aren't killing enough zombies? What if we aren't suffering enough, then what? Will we not live? Will we not receive our inheritance? But, the Spirit testifies "with" or "to" our spirits. The Spirit gives life. The Spirit gives power. The Spirit doesn't just save us, He makes our adoption possible. The Spirit isn't about making us afraid and unsure and insecure. He is about establishing to us that we are now part of the family with all the rights and privileges and inheritance that family possesses.

He doesn't want us to wonder about our inheritance, He wants us to believe that it is ours and to start to move in and possess what God has guaranteed by His power and grace to complete in us. Until then, think about what life would have been like if we had never been adopted. Think about what it is like to have a new life, a new Father and a new family. Think about what our future holds and work towards that future.