

**Marc Roby:** We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. In our session last week, we introduced the doctrine of adoption; which simply states that God not only justifies his chosen people, he also adopts them into his family. As we are told in John 1:12-13, "to all who received him [that's referring to Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."<sup>1</sup>

At the end of our previous session, we were discussing the privileges that derive from being God's adopted children. So, Dr. Spencer, how would you like to begin today?

Dr. Spencer: We ended our last session by noting that all true believers are related to one another as God's children. I want to continue with that thought and look at Question 34 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which asks, "What is adoption?" And the answer says that "Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges, of the sons of God." The first thing to notice about this answer is that it says it is an "act" of God, not a work of God. In other words, it is instantaneous, not a process that takes time to accomplish. It is a legal declaration of God, just like justification.

**Marc Roby:** And I love the fact that it cannot be revoked! God will never disown his adopted children.

Dr. Spencer: That is a wonderful truth for Christians to lay hold of. God does not change his mind and he doesn't make mistakes. If he adopted you as his son or daughter, nothing and no one can remove you from his family.

The second thing we should note from this answer is that when it says we are received into the number, it is referring to the family of God. And being a member of the family of God is a tremendous privilege. As the answer says, and we discussed last week, we have a right to the privileges of the sons of God. The New Testament very frequently uses the word brother to refer to other Christians, which, of course, includes brothers and sisters.

**Marc Roby:** And we are told in Hebrews 2:11 that "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers."

Dr. Spencer: That is amazing to say the least. And just like any other family, there are both privileges and responsibilities that go along with being a member of the family. While we are here on earth in this life of course we will only get to know a few of our Christian brothers and sisters, so the primary relationship we have with other believers is through our local church. Therefore, that is where we see this idea of the family of God most vividly.

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**Marc Roby: I don't think very many professing Christians today consider the other members of their church as family. At the very best, there will be groups of members who are good friends and those people will help each other once in a while just like any friends will. So, for example, they may help each other when someone has to move or something big like that.**

Dr. Spencer: That's true, it is very uncommon in this day and age for churches to function as families. But in Galatians 6:9-10 the apostle Paul wrote, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

So, for example, when someone is sick, the church should supply meals. If someone's car breaks down and that person doesn't have a lot of money or know anything about fixing cars, someone in the church who has that gift will fix the car. In churches that are functioning as they should, people help one another in all the ways that family members help one another.

**Marc Roby: That certainly is rare. Most modern churches, if they emphasize service at all, emphasize service to those outside of the church, like helping out at a soup kitchen or something like that.**

Dr. Spencer: And that's obviously a fine thing to do. We should do good to everyone, but not at the expense of helping our brothers and sisters in Christ, whom Paul calls the family of believers. We see this in action in the early church. In Acts 2:44-47 we read that "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

**Marc Roby: That's a wonderful picture of a church community living together like a large family. Although we should remind our listeners that the Bible is not teaching a kind of communism here.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't. We discussed that in Session 164, there is a world of difference between people freely and voluntarily helping one another and the government abolishing the right to private property. But there can be no doubt that if a member of a Christian church is in need and the church fails to help that person, the church is sinning. A Christian should never be without food, clothing and housing. Now, it must also be said that the church should be sure the person is doing all that he can to support himself, but his physical needs should be taken care of, even big expensive needs.

But the practical help of the church with our physical needs is *not* the greatest blessing a believer gains from being a member of the church. The Christian fellowship and encouragement to walk uprightly are even more important. We need one another to live the Christian life so that the church as a whole is a good witness. Jesus himself said, in John 13:34-35, "A new command I

give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

**Marc Roby: That is high standard, to love one another as Christ loved us. He died for us.**

Dr. Spencer: It is an impossibly high standard. But that is the biblical standard to which we are called to aspire. I am to care for my brothers and sisters in Christ as I would care for my own family. The apostle John wrote, in 1 John 3:16-17, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”

Material help is the easiest kind of help to give. But we are also called to help our brothers and sisters in other ways that demand our time and attention. The truth is that we all have needs and it is part of God’s plan that we all occasionally need help from others.

**Marc Roby: And God strengthens his people in various ways and provides various gifts so that we can all help one another. Even when we go through troubles, it is never just for ourselves. God gives us grace and brings us through the troubles so that we can go on and help others. We read in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”**

Dr. Spencer: That’s a great passage. We are part of a family and, like any family, we comfort, encourage and support one another as needed. We also rebuke, correct and build one another up in various ways. In Galatians 6:1-2 Paul wrote, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” And when he speaks about carrying each other’s burdens here, he is, in context, speaking primarily about helping each other avoid or repent of and forsake sin.

**Marc Roby: And it’s important that he says that those who are spiritual, meaning more mature in the faith, should restore the person gently. We are not to treat our brothers and sisters in Christ harshly.**

Dr. Spencer: No, they are family. We should treat them like family. It is also important to take note of the fact that God trains us as a human father would train his own children. J.I. Packer notes that Christ’s famous Sermon on the Mount contains the kind of instruction a parent gives a child. Rather than just giving a list of specific rules, he gives us what Packer calls “an ethic of responsible freedom ... concrete, imaginative, teaching general principles from particular instances, and seeking all the time to bring the children to appreciate and share the parents’ own attitudes and view of life.”<sup>2</sup>

**Marc Roby: Now, does Packer list what he thinks these general principles of conduct are?**

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<sup>2</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, InterVarsity Press, 1993, pp 210-211

Dr. Spencer: Yes. He summarizes the teaching in three principles. He says that “Number one is the principle of *imitating the Father*.”<sup>3</sup> And he illustrates that by looking at the reason Christ gives for some of his instruction. For example, in Matthew 5:43-45 Christ says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Christ first quoted a common saying of the time to love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but then he tells them, on his own authority I must add, to love even their enemies. And then, and this is the main point of importance right now, he cites the fact that our Father in heaven provides good things even to those people on earth who hate him, and if we are his children, we should imitate him.

**Marc Roby: That makes me think of Ephesians 5:1-2 where Paul wrote, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that’s very much the same point. Jesus was telling us to imitate our heavenly Father, and Paul is telling us to imitate our older brother Jesus, who perfectly obeyed the Father.

Packer says the second general principle is that of glorifying the Father. He cites Matthew 5:16 where Christ said that his disciples should “let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Any good child wants to live in a way that brings glory to their father, not shame.

**Marc Roby: Very well. What is the third principle that Packer found in Christ’s teaching?**

Dr. Spencer: That of pleasing our Father in heaven. For example, in Matthew 6:1 Christ says, “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” In other words, we aren’t to be motivated by a desire to please men, but to please our Father in heaven. This is again just what is true in a good family here on earth. An obedient child wants to please his father, not the next-door neighbor.

If we are God’s children, we will want to live by these principles: imitating God, bringing glory to God and pleasing God.

**Marc Roby: It is instructive to note that the Bible speaks of only one other family of men. If we are not children of God, we are children of the devil.**

Dr. Spencer: That is a very important point, although an unpleasant one and one that many modern professing Christians object to. We are all born sinners. Rebels against God. We inherit our sinful nature from Adam. In Ephesians 2:1-2 Paul wrote to believers, saying, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.” In the Greek, it actually says, the sons of disobedience. The idea is

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg. 211

that there are two families, God's family and the family of the devil; those who are rebellious enemies of God.

And we can contrast the sons of disobedience with obedient children. In 1 Peter 1:14-16 Peter wrote, "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" Which again also speaks about emulating the Father.

**Marc Roby: And we read in John 8:44 that Jesus himself told some Jews who did not believe him, but claimed to be children of Abraham, that "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."**

Dr. Spencer: That is a good verse, although not a popular one to say the least. And we see both families spoken of by the apostle John. In 1 John 3:10 we are told, "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother."

**Marc Roby: Well, that's explicit – the children of God and the children of the devil. No third option is mentioned. And, clearly, not doing what is right, or not loving your brother, is being a child of disobedience.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. God commands us to love our brother and all of his commands are just and right. So, we see that the Bible classifies all human beings as either being children of God or children of the devil.

Packer makes another very interesting point about the fact that God is presented to believers in the New Testament as our heavenly Father. This is a wonderful and significant change from the Old Testament dispensation. In the Old Testament, God is known by the covenant name of Yahweh, or Jehovah, both pronunciations refer to what is known as the tetragrammaton, which simply refers to the four letters used in the Hebrew, it can be rendered in English as "I Am". We have spoken before, most notably in Sessions 6 and 49, about this name for God, but it emphasizes God's transcendence. He is the Creator. He exists necessarily and independently. Matthew Henry wrote that "the greatest and best man in the world must say, By the grace of God *I am what I am*; but God says absolutely – and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say – *I am that I am*."<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: That is simply incomprehensible.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And, in a sense, that is precisely the point. Packer notes that "It was an enigmatic name, a name calculated to awaken humility and awe before the mystery of the Divine being ... The whole spirit of Old Testament religion was determined by the thought of God's holiness. The constant emphasis was that human beings, because of their weakness as creatures

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry's Commentary, Hendrickson Publishers, 1991, Vol. 1, pg. 225

and their defilement as sinful creatures, must learn to humble themselves and be reverent before God. Religion was ‘the fear of the Lord’”.<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: And, of course, we must still humble ourselves and be reverent before God. The fear of the Lord is still the beginning of wisdom and necessary to true faith.**

Dr. Spencer: Oh, that’s absolutely true. And Packer doesn’t imply anything else when you read it all in context. Nonetheless, his point is important. No Old Testament Jew would ever have thought to call God Father, let alone Abba, daddy. That would have been completely outside the realm of consideration to be so familiar with God. That’s why it is so incredible that the New Testament tells us we can, and should, call God Abba, daddy. He *is* our heavenly Father and we *are* his adopted children.

Packer says that “The revelation to the believer that God is his Father is in a sense the climax of the Bible”.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to write that “To those who are Christ’s, the holy God is a loving Father; they belong to his family; they may approach him without fear and always be sure of his fatherly concern and care. This is the heart of the New Testament message.”<sup>7</sup>

**Marc Roby: I like that quote, although I would take exception to the idea that we can approach God without fear, Paul tells us in Philippians 2:12 to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree, and I’m quite sure Packer would have also. But I think he is referring to a different kind of fear here. As God’s children, we do not need to fear God as the ultimate Judge of the universe who is going to condemn us to eternal punishment for our sins. But we do still need to have a reverential fear and awe of him as our Creator.

And it goes along with this fact that when Christians endure hardship and suffering in this life it is very different for us as God’s adopted children than it is for the unbeliever. God disciplines us as a father disciplines his children, so we can know for certain that Romans 8:28 is true, which says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

**Marc Roby: That is a wonderful promise from God and I think it is also a good place to end for today. Let me close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We will do our best to answer.**

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<sup>5</sup> Packer, op. cit., pg. 202

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg. 203