

## Romans 8.12-17

Let's imagine the plight of a poor orphan boy in Somewheresville, America. He was taken from his home after the neighbor called the cops on his parents. They always fought, they always screamed, they always smoked funny things. The cops came and took them to jail and they found him locked in his room, where his parents always made him stay. And they found him with the stale food they slipped under his door, and the smelly sheets, and the dirty clothes, and the bruises they gave him.

So now he's an orphan. His parents never loved him, and now at the orphanage he doesn't have a lot of friends, and the other kids make fun of him. And he begins to wonder if anyone could like him, let alone love him. Maybe something was wrong with him, maybe he didn't deserve love.

But then a family comes. A Mom and Dad with a little girl come one day and they say they wanted him. Him! He won't let himself believe it at first, he's been burned too many times. Even when they filled out the forms, did the visits, and paid the money – it couldn't be true, there was a cruel trick in there somewhere. But then, one day, they took him home and it was more than papers and money it was a real relationship. Would they take him back if he misbehaved? Would they

lock him in a room like his old parents? No, no. Over time he began to see how they loved him, they disciplined him when he did wrong, sure, but there was *never* a question, after the first day, that he was a beloved member of the family. And so the relationship grew so that eventually when his new Dad and Mom tucked him into his clean bed full of stuffed animals, and kissed him on the head, he finally said “Goodnight, Mom and Dad.”

Adoption is a beautiful thing. It takes the unwanted and shows them they are wanted. It takes the unloved and shows they are loved. It takes the hopeless and gives them a future, a name, an inheritance. How beautiful!

Adoption is a legal contract, but it’s more, it’s also the formation of a new relationship. It is not without struggle, however. The orphan will still struggle with their identity, “who am I? Am I the product of my biological parents, am I the fullness and solely a member of my new adoptive family? Is their daughter more a member of the family than me?” Some adoptees don’t even know their birth parents, and there are question marks hanging over their heads: “Who are they? What were they like? Where was I from? Why did they give me up?” There are struggles bonding with the new family, there are struggles with abandonment from

the old family. Adoption is a beautiful thing, being a part of a family is a beautiful thing, but it is not without struggle.

And we all know that, right? Whether we were adopted or not, we know that in our families there is struggle. There are little tussles, spots on the mirror, and there are grudges and wounds that run deep. While this is normal for sinful humans, how sad when these struggles fester and grow so that families tear apart? And sometimes over such frivolous things! I have seen and heard families bicker over money, land, and mom's old necklace! It's maddening! How years of a relationship hang in the balance as they fight over *stuff* or pride. A refusal to apologize, a refusal to talk, a refusal to be wronged in the slightest corrupts a lifetime relationship. And this gift of family is ruined.

And family is a gift. A dear gift of God. And, no, our families are not perfect, and some, like that poor orphan's biological family are tragically cruel. Other families are severely wounded by the loss of a loved one, others are rifted to the point of disowning one another. But I do not bring all this family talk up just to give a few tips about family life, but if I was going to give a few tips they would be this: forgive! And talk, even about the uncomfortable stuff, or about anything at all – put the phones down for a while each day - eat dinner together. And forgive. And

be willing to compromise. And forgive. And ask yourself how you may have hurt someone else. And forgive. And try to view things from their perspective. And have I mentioned to forgive?

But those points and tips aside, I bring up this talk about family, because in our Epistle reading today Paul reminds us that we all have a little something in common with the orphan in my story today, because we all have been adopted into a new family. God's family. It happened in a legal sense, as the true Son of God, gave himself up to suffer hell, that our adoption papers might be signed in his death that we were united to in baptism. And it happened, just like our orphan grew to know, in a relational sense. We have a Father. A Father who is good. A Father who cares for us, never abuses, who hears our prayers, who is with us and does not abandon us, and who gives us an eternal inheritance.

And we in the Lord's family fight over what... some money? Or that harsh word? Or differing mission views? Please, our heavenly Father gives us so much more it's not even close. But do we care half as much for that? And that's the problem, that's the sin and struggle we have as God's children. He has given us a new home and a new identity as his forgiven children yet how often do we root our identities in something else? We think of political parties, sexual orientations, we think of

cliques, we think of our struggles and sicknesses. So today I want to ask: “What defines us?” Are we *just* smart or dumb, conservative or liberal, are we *just* healthy or at-risk, rich or poor, are we *just* black or white, good looking or not?

Or are we first and foremost someone made in the image of God and redeemed by his blood!? Let us not play games, friends. Orphans come in all shapes and sizes and from all places, but what matters is the family they are brought into. It is the same for us. So “what defines us?” The Father who has called us sinners into his family. That orphan boy, when he grows up to play pee-wee football will have his family name on his jersey. It is the same for us, God has put his name on us, and he shows us our value. So let’s let Him and His word guide our principles and decisions.

Does a child of God fear that the Father will kick them out of the family and lose the inheritance if they fall short? So cast off the burden of your sins - they have been paid in full. Does a child of God worry that they will be abandoned by the Father when life gets rough? So cast off the fears of sickness and death. Does a child of God use this new spot in the family as a way to take advantage of them or their mercy? Would the orphan in our story, thankful for his new family that loves him, think that is a good way to say “thank you”? I don’t think so.

Paul writes: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons!” Our orphan belongs to a new family, and he sure won’t be going back to the old one. It’s the same for us, why go back?

I mean, I know why we are tempted to. The world has so many cool things, money, fame, sex, substances, entertainment. Which of them claimed you as their own and won’t leave you when things go bad? Which of them would, and have already, given their lives to you? Which will be there at 3am when you need them? Which of them is free of abuse? Which of them give you sustenance for eternal life!? None of them. That’s the old family, the old family you needed to be ripped from. Why define yourself by them, make your world all about them? Especially when our Father gives us them all in healthy ways, but he gives us so much more...

So let us grow in our relationship with God. How? By hearing his powerful Word as our other readings remind us, and we will not be able to help but bear fruit of joy and courage and mercy. So cut back the weeds, till the soil, learn the Word of God and find in it the Hope and peace which surpasses all understanding.

We are fickle and greedy and sinful and broken, but our Father looked with mercy on us. He picked us orphans with no friends, with no prospects, us troublemakers, and he welcomed us into his family at a price far more than we could imagine, the price of his One and only Son. Who gives their Son for an orphan? It's madness to even think about. The Father, who loves his Son, no doubt, gave him up for you! And the Son was willing too, by the way. That is the Love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit for you. It's mind boggling.

So when we wander, he welcomes us back, and when we are in his household, we receive his blessings. We get an identity now, his strength now, we get his presence and peace now. And we get hope for the future because, one day, we will get the inheritance - where there will be joy and peace and every relationship will be healed, when we feast with the whole family of God in His Kingdom that has no end. In the name of the merciful Father and the Son given to make us sons and daughters. Amen.