

## **Introduction**

There is only one earth. And all humanity inhabits it. But humanity is marked tribalism—one earth but many peoples. And much of the tribes are in conflict. Each group tries to promote itself over and against other groups thinking of themselves as superior. And in our day, if you can assert that your group is the most oppressed, then good for you, you seem to be given the superior right to strike out most violently against other groups and get away with it. With all the strife in the world, sometimes people wonder if there is any hope for folks to get along and treat each other with respect. As Christians we know the answer. While everyone likes to think of themselves as superior to others, we know that only one person is superior to all others—that, of course, is Jesus Christ. And what matters about each of us is how we are related to him. In him all the things that distinguish and divide us actually fade into unimportance. Paul explores the matter in our text this morning.

[Read text and Pray]

Where are we in Galatians? Paul is STILL making the biblical case against the error certain false teachers were advancing in Galatia. They claimed that believing in Jesus was not enough. The Gentiles also needed to embrace the Jewish law. For all intents and purposes the Gentiles needed to become Jews and submit to the law of Moses. In particular, they needed to be circumcised in order to truly be right with God. Paul has demonstrated the error of the teaching in a number of ways. We are currently at the point at which Paul is sweeping through biblical history from God's promise made to Abraham to the giving of the law 430 years later to the coming of Christ. He has displayed that the law was always meant to be in a temporary and subservient role to the promise.

The law increases and exposes sin; it imprisons and holds sinners captive. God gave the law so that sinners might be led to cry out for help and look to Christ—the only one who is able to rescue. The law is like a cruel babysitter from which sinners long to be set free. And the good news is that with the coming of Christ, the time for the law as a spiritual babysitter is over. There is no need to become a Jew and no need to follow the law of Moses.

Paul declares this good news in Galatians 3:25: "Now that faith has come we are no longer under a guardian." Justification has always been by faith. When one believes God, God counts them as righteous. The "coming of faith" is a reference to the coming of Christ, and justification is now by a faith that rests explicitly in Christ and his work. And now that God has sent forth his Son, we are no longer under a guardian. And why is that? Paul explains that the coming of Christ marks the time set by God for the guardian to be removed. It is the time of full sonship. In Christ we become full sons of God, and we are no longer under a guardian. What Paul is doing in verses 26-29 is elaborating on the magnificence of being sons of God according to promise. Again we are brought to see the superiority of the promise God made to Abraham over the law God gave to Moses. Moving through the text, I will highlight the meaning of sonship, the identity of sonship, and the fellowship of sonship.

### **I. The Meaning of Sonship.**

You can just FEEL the joy oozing out of Paul as he says, "now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God." We are going to talk more fully about the significance of being sons of God next week, but it will do us well to ponder it to a small extent right now.

Last week we mentioned that the law is like Pharaoh to the Israelites. It is a tyrant that commands of you more than you can possibly do and punishes you for not doing it. It holds you captive and imprisons you and will not let you go. But all those who are in Christ are no longer under the cruel task-master of the law. For they are all sons of God. To be sons of God is to be out from under the taskmaster and in the arms of One who truly loves and truly cares.

My father was a man of great love and care for his children. I may have told this story before, but when I was 15 years old, I went to France on my own. Our family had lived there before, and I went to visit and stay with a French family we knew. Well, the return trip did not work out as we had planned. I ended up stranded in London, England. There was a string of people who were living right there in the airport. And they all already had established their place in an endless line waiting to purchase the same ticket we had assumed I could walk up to the counter and purchase. And not only that, a sign on the Delta Airlines counter announced that no such tickets were available for at least three days.

I was already incredibly homesick, and now what would I do? There was only one thing I could do besides pray, which I surely did right away. But besides praying to my heavenly Father, I called my earthly father. When he answered the phone, all I could do was burst out in tears. But within hours I was in the care of a friend of a friend, and the next day I was on a flight back home. Little did I know all that my dad went through to get me home, but I knew he would do whatever it took because I knew he cared for me.

Jesus said, "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him." Being one of the sons of God is a place of high privilege and security and blessing. Little do we really grasp the cost he paid for us to be his sons. Sonship is a relationship in which you can know that you are cared for beyond belief. Some of us had really good earthly fathers and some of us never knew our earthly father. Regardless, there is no Father like our Father who is in heaven. He cares. He loves. He provides. He rescues. He is there. He knows better than us what is good for us. And He can do anything he wants to do. It is good to be a son of God.

The term "son" was a legal term used in first century Rome to designate a person who possessed the status of sonship so that they were considered to be a legal heir. It is clear that Paul is pointing to the significance of Christ's followers being counted as sons of God. The implication is that we (men and women) have been adopted into God's family as legal sons who are also of age to receive inheritance. As such we enjoy all the rights and privileges appertaining thereunto. We will get into this next time when we get into chapter 4.

Now let's turn to ...

## **II. The Identity of Sonship.**

Who are those individuals which have ascended into the high status of being sons of God? What Paul says here indicates that there are three closely related markers—their position, their faith and their fashion.

A. The position of sons of God is that they are "in Christ." That is, they are in union with Christ. They have become one with him. Paul states, "in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God." Then in verse 27 he identifies the sons of God as those who "were baptized into Christ." There is debate as to whether Paul is referencing water baptism here. If so, it is only as an outward expression of an inward reality. It is clear from the point Paul is making that baptism itself does not unite one to

Christ any more than circumcision makes one right with God. However, water baptism depicts one's union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. The word "baptize" means to immerse, to dip, to submerge. Those who are sons of God by adoption have reached that status by being immersed into Christ. They are in union with Christ Jesus. This union is highlighted a third time in these few verses in the 28<sup>th</sup> verse where it says. "you are all one IN CHRIST JESUS."

To be "in Christ" is to be in union with Christ. It is to have become one with Christ. Louis Berkhof defines union with Christ as "that intimate, vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation" (Systematic Theology). Union with Christ expresses the intertwining of a person with Christ. He is our representative and we are associated with him. He is the vine and we are the branches. He is the bridegroom and we are the bride and we are no longer two but one because of our union with him. Union with Christ is an overarching description of a Christian's relationship with Christ. Christ is the true son of God, and it is by virtue of one's union with Christ that one becomes a son of God. So who are the sons of God? They are those who are "in Christ Jesus"—those who have become one with him. That is the position of the sons of God; they are in Christ. They have been baptized into him; they have been immersed into him; they have been united with him. They belong to Christ.

B. The second marker of the sons of God highlighted here by Paul is the marker of faith. "For in Christ Jesus, you are all sons of God, through faith." This marker takes us back to Abraham. He believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. No one becomes a son of God through the law. However, those who are its captives, those whom the law has tightly imprisoned in their sinful disobedience, may be set free from the law and justified, made right with God through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Whoever believes will have eternal life. For by grace are you saved through faith. What must one do to be saved? "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." It is by faith that a sinner is brought into vital union with Christ such that he is redeemed.

If I were to ask you personally this morning, "Are you a son of God?" What would your answer be? Are you a son of God? Now let's suppose that your answer is "Yes, I am a son of God." Then there is a second question I have for you. Upon what are you basing that notion? Some people assert that ALL are God's children. Hence I am a child of God. Well, it is true that each and every one of us owe our existence to God, that he is our creator. But it is not true that ALL of us are God's sons. Paul is explicit in this very passage. He indeed says you are ALL sons of God, but he is speaking explicitly of those who, despite all their differences and distinctions, by faith have been brought into union with Christ. ALL who believe are one with Christ. But those who have not believed abide under the condemnation of God. The only solid basis for possessing the notion that you are a son of God is that you are believing on Christ Jesus.

C. Now there is a third mark of the sons of God to which Paul directs our attention. He says that "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Jesus is our fashion. He is what we wear. Growing out of faith because of who one is in Christ, that identity is apparent through our apparel. What we wear exhibits who we are. Paul declares that those who are in Christ, those who believe in him, wear the clothing of Christ. Christ Jesus is their clothing.

This appears to be a reference to the transformation that takes place in the life of a believer. Paul uses this same language as an exhortation in Romans 13. He says, "Let us walk properly ... not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." The putting off of the flesh and the putting on of Christ are NOT acts done in order to become sons of God, but it

is what the sons of God do because of who they are. Putting on Christ is one's willing identity, and the sons of God are so identified with Christ that they gladly live Christ out in their lives. They don't live according to the flesh. They do not set their minds on the flesh. Rather they set their minds on things above where Christ is. It is as Paul said to the Colossians, "Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." So you put to death that which is earthly in you.

So the identity of the sons of God is that they are in Christ. They are of faith not works of the law. And they have put on Christ. There is a transformation which flows out of who they are in him. Hunger and thirst for righteousness should drive the one who is a son of God to put to death the deeds of the flesh and to put on Christ. If we are sons of God, here is one of the marks. We put on Christ. Our lives put him on display.

Is Christ on display in your life? I am not asking if you put on a show. I am asking if the reality of Christ in you makes its way out into your living. Paul found it necessary often to urge his audiences to flee from gratifying the flesh and to live out the righteousness that characterized their standing with God. Sons usually desire to emulate their fathers. Certainly the younger they are, children tend to follow in their parents footsteps. A couple of images are etched in my brain. One is of years ago when my son Philip was no more than 2 or 3. I was having to replace the fill valve on a toilet. I lay on my back under the toilet looking up in order to loosen the nut underneath the valve. On the other side of the toilet lay my son Philip trying to do exactly what I was doing. A generation later there is a picture of Titus at our house when I was performing the same task. And there he is sitting on the floor beside me with his tool in hand as well.

Sons of God, long for and pray for, seek for more and more of his righteousness in your life. Put on Christ because that's what sons want to do!

Let's look at ...

### **III. The Fellowship of Sonship.**

I want you to see a recurring theme in these verses. It is theme of entirety, totality, and completeness. Years ago there was a commercial for alka-seltzer—you know, the "plop-plop-fizz-fizz; oh what a relief it is" treatment for indigestion. Well in the commercial I am thinking of, there is this guy waking up in the middle of the night and sitting on the side of his bed. And he is repeating the line, "I can't believe I ate that whole thing." There were no left overs that night. He ate it all. In a far better way, Paul is saying something about the whole thing. It is the whole group of the sons of God.

Catch the emphasis on all: "in Christ Jesus you are ALL sons of God, through faith. For AS MANY OF YOU AS were baptized into Christ have put on Christ ... You are ALL one in Christ Jesus. The body of those who are in Christ are ALL part of the whole. No one who has been united with Christ is left out. No one is excluded from sonship. ALL in Christ are sons of God. ALL who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ALL are one who are in Christ. Your ethnicity does not matter. You may be a Jew by birth or you may be a Gentile. Your social status does not matter. You may be a slave or you may be a freeman. Your sex does not matter. You may be male or female. Each of these distinctions is real—gender distinction, social distinction, ethnic distinctions. But in Christ these distinctions become irrelevant as they relate to sonship and "heirship."

A son would not normally be a Greek. A son would not normally be a slave. And certainly a son would not normally be a female. However, in Christ sons can be each of these, and they are. And that is what Paul means when he states, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor

free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ.” As far as belonging to Christ, there is none who belong to Christ who are not sons. There are no first-class and second-class sons. There are not daughters and sons. There is not an inner-circle of sons based on Jewishness or the lack thereof. There are only those who have put on Christ. All of them are sons. Paul is not saying all are males. Remember, sonship here is a legal position by which one is recognized as a qualified heir. So Paul is saying that there is no one who is in Christ who is somehow less than anyone else who is in Christ. All are one in Christ. It is a fellowship of unity and oneness and wholeness and completeness.

Why did Paul need to say this? Well, it is because there are always people around who think they are special; they are superior to others. Especially in the historical context, Jews thought they were special. No doubt this was an underlying catalyst for those who were asserting that to truly be right with God one had to become a Jew and obey the mosaic law. But Paul is saying that Jews are no more special than Gentiles. In Christ, your Jewishness is irrelevant.

Certainly slaves may have thought themselves inferior to those who were free. Free persons would have had a tendency to think themselves better than slaves. Men thought themselves superior to women. But Paul is saying that neither is superior. Neither is a higher level of son. Neither fails to qualify for sonship, because what matters is being in Christ.

Now I have to say a word at this point because verse 28 is a favorite text for those who would argue for an elimination of distinctions in roles of men and women in the church and family and for acceptance of homosexuality. For years this verse has been used as a proof-text to support the idea of females serving in the church as elders and pastors. The argument is based on the notion that since Christ has come, gender is no longer an issue. Those who favor the normalization of homosexuality use the same line of reasoning. In both cases, however, it is an absolute misconstrual of what Paul is teaching.

Let’s consider first the case of slave and free. Paul is contending here that in Christ the slave is not an unworthy outcast but just as much a son of God as the free. He is not contending that all Christians must free their slaves. He gave special and specific directives to Christians who were both slaves and masters. His word to slaves was to obey their earthly masters—not break free because they are not a slave any more.

Likewise, Paul administers specific directions to husbands and wives and to churches in regard to the role of women and men in their fellowships. So there are roles and relationships that continue to be distinguished in relationship to our sex and our place in society even though those distinctions lose their relevance in terms of being considered sons of God. Paul’s point here is not that women are no longer considered women or that slaves are no longer slaves or that ethnic Gentiles are no longer Gentiles. His point is that each of these persons, though they are opposites in many ways, are yet one before God in Christ in terms of sonship. Each is of equal importance and value. Each is equally a co-heir of the promise of Abraham. All who are in Christ share equally in the wonder of a unified fellowship and equally and gloriously in the inheritance that belongs to Abraham’s offspring. “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

## **Conclusion**

To apply this text to Christians in the present day is to emphasize to us that in Christ we are all supremely blessed, but no one of us is superior to the other. We may have varying gifts and varying roles, but none of those gifts or roles makes us superior to another person.

I think that embedded within each of our hearts is the desire to be able to think of ourselves as better, more highly significant, superlative in some category or way than others, at least most others. It remains part of the conflict with the flesh even once we are converted. Some who think themselves less gifted or granted less opportunity may look down on themselves and pity themselves. Others who think themselves superior think highly of themselves. But here's the thing. There is no more superior place to be than to be "in Christ." And you do not get into Christ because you are superior to others or inferior to others. You do not get into Christ by your works. The only way into Christ is by faith. And those who are in Christ are ALL sons of God, who put on Christ. We are all one in Christ. And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

So don't allow your flesh to convince you that you are unimportant. And don't allow your flesh to convince you that you are of superior importance. First of all, it is not about you. You and I don't have a thing to offer God. His work of redemption, sanctification, and glorification is not designed to take superior people and make them more superior. His work is to stake out pitiful people who once lay dead on the ocean floor. He takes them up from death and raises them to life. He redeems them without reference to who the world thinks they are or they think they are. And what they become that is most important is people who are in Christ who put on Christ. In him, they are ALL sons of God and heirs according to promise.

Every day this world grows darker and more chaotic. Conflict intensifies. There is conflict between Palestinians and Jews. That conflict is seen and felt even right here in the USA. Social warfare is at an extreme level as people with different skin colors give expression to their felt superiority. There is conflict between the impoverished and the wealthy. People who have are empowered to take advantage of the ones who have not. And the ones who have not steal shamelessly from the ones who have. Men abuse and use women. Women do the same with men. Identity politics are built off the shared sense of superiority of one kind of people group over against another. There is social and cultural warfare everywhere you go. Sadly, it is not absent in the one place it most should be—the church.

Is there anything that can bring these divergent groups together? You bet! God has given it. It is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone stands on a level plane before Christ. That level plane is the level of absolute need and desperation. It is the stratum of total depravity or spiritual death. There nothing makes us superior to anybody. There everyone's need is the same. Everyone needs to be united with Christ.

Those who believe are joined together with Christ. They are baptized into him. His life becomes their life. His death becomes their death. His resurrection becomes their resurrection. They are clothed with Christ. And as such all those excuses to fight for recognition as superior melt away because what matters is Jesus.

If you are not in Christ through faith, you are not a son and not an heir of God. All you have got is what you have, and that ain't much no matter how much you think it is. It guarantees eternal punishment. But you can become one of the sons of God by adoption. You must believe in Jesus Christ. Then you will be in Christ. You will be in a position that what you are and who you are in yourself is not what matters, but in Christ you will have all because in Christ you are a son ... of ... God.