**Foundations (43 of 60) Adoption & Union with Christ - RC Sproul**

The following message is a presentation of Ligonier Ministries, home of the radio program Renewing Your Mind with R. C. Sproul. When John wrote his epistles, he makes a statement of what I call apostolic astonishment. In the very first epistle that he wrote, in the third chapter, he makes this observation, "'Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God.

Therefore, the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. But beloved, now we are children of God.'" Now, we notice in the tone of John's writing here a sense of amazement that would seem to go right over our heads in the culture in which we live today, because if there's anything we tend to take for granted that was never taken for granted by the apostolic church, it is that we are the children of God. Now, there are reasons for that.

We've been raised in a culture that has been heavily influenced by nineteenth-century liberal theology, and in the nineteenth century there was a rise of interest in the study of world religions. As explorations had traversed the globe in those days, people became more knowledgeable of other religions from which heretofore they had been shielded by the sheer force of distance. And so, we saw a frenzy of interest in the nineteenth century, particularly in Germany, of studying comparative religion.

In fact, comparative religion became a new academic discipline. And what happened during this period was that the anthropologists, the sociologists, and the theologians, as they examined the world religions, sought to penetrate to the core of each of these religions to distill the essence and discover the rock-bottom similarities among Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and so on. And Adolf von Harnack, for example, wrote a book entitled in German, The Essence of Christianity, and it was translated under the English title, What is Christianity?, in which he sought to reduce Christianity to its most basic common denominator that it shared with other religions.

And he said the essence of the Christian faith is found in two premises, one, the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man, both concepts of which, in my opinion, are not taught in the Bible. There is a vague reference to the universal fatherhood in the sense that Paul, when he encountered the philosophers at Athens, quoted from one of their secular poets saying, we are all God's offspring, in the sense that God is the creator of all people. But the idea of the fatherhood of God is something that is in the New Testament a radical concept and not something that is just simply tacitly assumed that everybody in the world enjoys.

But because of the influence of 19th century liberalism and comparative religion, as I say, we've been reared in a culture where we've been told over and over and over again that everybody in the world is a child of God. We're all God's children, and God is the father of us all. Now, that's a popular notion secularly, but it is not the idea that we meet in sacred Scripture.

Again, what John expresses here is an attitude of amazement. Behold, what manner of love is this, that we should be called the children of God? He's overwhelmed with that realization, and he said, of course, beloved, we are the children of God. Now, as I suggested a moment ago, that idea was not commonplace in biblical days.

In fact, it was a radical idea, a radical innovation. I've mentioned in other courses the studies that were done by a European scholar by the name of Jehoiakim Jeremias, and Jeremias did a study of the concept scripturally of the fatherhood of God, and he noticed, for example, that in the Old Testament and among the Jewish people in antiquity, children were instructed in appropriate titles and phrases with which a person could address God in prayer, and he could be called the sovereign one or the ruler or the creator and so on. And what was conspicuously absent from that lengthy list of approved titles by which one addressed God in prayer directly was the title father.

Yet by contrast, when we come to the New Testament and we examine the prayers of Jesus, in every single recorded prayer of Jesus in the New Testament save one, Jesus addresses God directly as His Father. Now, that was not missed by his contemporaries. Incidentally, Jeremias went on to say that then apart from the Christian community, the first reference in print that he could find of any Jewish person directly addressing God as Father in prayer was in the 10th century A.D. in Italy.

In other words, this was a radical departure from custom when Jesus dared to address God as Father. As again, that was not missed by his contemporaries, because this is one of the things that outraged the Pharisees when they heard Jesus speak of God as His Father. They took that as a tacit claim to deity, He's making Himself equal with God.

Now, why would you conclude that? We wouldn't conclude that today if we heard somebody addressing God as Father. We wouldn't dream that that would indicate any kind of arrogance or singular claim to deity, but the contemporaries of Jesus did because they understood the radical character of it. Now, one of the things that is even more astonishing is that not only did Jesus address God as His Father, but when His disciples came to Him and asked Him to teach them how to pray, He said to them in the first instance, when you pray, pray like this, saying, Our Father who art in heaven.

And the very first word of the Lord's prayer is radical, beautiful, and powerful. It's beyond measure that Jesus said, not only am I going to address God as Father, but I am now inviting you to do exactly the same thing so that when you pray, you say to God, Our Father. And He extends the privilege of addressing God as Father to His disciples.

Now, there have been some distorted movements abounding in the Christian community of late and places where there's been a tremendous impact upon the church from the New Age movement. I think, for example, of Paul Crouch on TBN, where he has, despite pleas from sober theologians not to do it, has repeatedly declared to his television audience this comment, and I've seen it echoed by other leaders in our day. Crouch's comment is this, that any Christian who is indwelt by the Holy Ghost is as much the incarnation of God as Jesus was.

I mean, it astonishes me that anybody bearing the name of Christ would so make such an extravagant statement that would deny the uniqueness of Christ in His incarnation. But I think what's happening here are that Christians are realizing something of the significance of being able to be called children of God, but are getting carried away with it to such an extent that they obscure the uniqueness of the Sonship of Christ. Now, that idea of Christ's Sonship is also central to the New Testament.

Not only was it radical that Jesus address God as Father, but there are three references in the New Testament wherein God is heard to speak audibly from heaven. And in all three of those occasions, what God is declaring from the heavens audibly is the Sonship of Jesus. This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.

This is my Son. Listen to Him. And so, we must be very careful to protect the uniqueness of the Sonship that Christ has with the Father.

Indeed, He is called the monogamous, or the only begotten of the Father. And of course, Jesus spells it out that by nature, we are not the children of God. By nature, we're children of wrath.

By nature, we are children of Satan. The only one who can lay claim to being a child of God inherently or naturally is Jesus Himself. So the claim to being children of God is not a claim that we can just simply assume by virtue of our being human.

And yet, John says, we are the children of God. How can that be? Well, let's go back earlier in John's writing to the first chapter of his gospel, wherein the prologue to John's gospel, we read in verse 10, he was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive him.

But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not of blood, nor the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God. Now other translations will read that text, as many as received him, to them he gave the power to become the children of God, or the authority to become the children of God. In this case, it was the right to become the children of God.

The word that is in the Greek there is a powerful word for authority. It is the same word that is used of Jesus by His contemporaries when they are awestruck by Him, and they say, you know, He speaks not as the scribes and the Pharisees, but as one having authority. It's the same word here, that that extraordinary authority is given to us by the Holy Spirit, that we are given the right to be called the children of God.

So again, the first thing we learn here is that to be the children of God is something that is a gift. It is not earned. It is not something that is received inherently by natural birth.

Well, how do we receive it? Well, we look then to Paul's letter to the Romans to the eighth chapter, in which he makes this comment in verse 12, Therefore, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 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. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.

For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, Abba, Father. The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together. So, you get the point here.

How are we the children of God? By adoption, and I mentioned in our last lecture that this is one of the fruits of faith, one of the fruits of our justification, that when we are reconciled to God, God doesn't just give us peace, but He brings us into His own family. In fact, this is one of the important images for the church in the New Testament, that the church is the family of God, and it's a family where there's one father and there's one son, and then everyone else in the family is adopted. All of us are the adopted children of God, and that's why we look to Christ as our elder brother, and we have been made heirs of God because we are joint heirs with Christ, because the true Son of God makes available all that He receives in His inheritance, His full legacy He shares with His brothers and with His sisters.

And so, that is something we ought never to take for granted, and every time we say the Lord's Prayer and we say, Our Father, we should tremble and be expressing again the amazement that John gave later in his astonishment that we of all people should be called the children of God, and yet, by virtue of our adoption, we truly are, because adoption to God is real. There's no second-class membership in His family. We can distinguish between the natural children of God and the adopted children of God, but once the adoption takes place, there is no difference in the status of membership in His family.

He gives to all of His children the full measure of the inheritance that belongs to the rightful son. Now, how does this take place? One other point that we need to make in our study of our salvation here is that in our adoption, we also enjoy what is called the mystical union of the believer with Christ. Now, as soon as we describe something as being mystical, we are thereby saying that it is beyond our ability to express in normal categories.

It transcends the natural and in a certain sense is ineffable. We get a clue to this by a study of the prepositions that we find in the New Testament. There are two prepositions, both of which could be translated by the English word in, and they are the Greek words en and ais.

But the technical distinction between these two words is important. The word en, the preposition en, means in or inside of, where the preposition ais means into. Whenever the New Testament calls people to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you know, what must I do to be saved? Well, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

It's interesting that the word that is normally used in those evangelical calls and invitations is the word ais. And so really what the Apostle is saying, he says, is believe into Christ, not just believe something about Him, as we mean when we say you believe in something, you believe in the tooth fairy or you believe in Santa Claus. Here it's not just believing that there is a Jesus, but it is a believing into Christ.

And if I draw a circle here on the board, and we call this a room and everything outside the circle is the outer courtyard, for me to get from here to there, I have to go through a door or find a way to move into that sphere or into that circle. Now, once I make the transition, once I go across the threshold from the outside to the inside and get in this chamber, then I am en, I am inside the room. The entering is the ais.

Once we're in there, we have the en. Now these two words, as I say, are so important because in the New Testament we are not only told to believe into Christ, but the New Testament Scriptures tell us that all of those who have genuine faith are in Christ Jesus, that we are in Christ and Christ is in us. That there is a spiritual union between every single Christian believer and Christ Himself.

And this has radical implications for the church, as we will see later, that as I said a moment ago, we all share a common adoption so that we are all part of the family of God. But not only that, we are all part of the mystical communion of the saints. If I am in Christ and Christ is in me, if there is a union where we say, this is Christ and I enter into Christ, He is in me, I am in Him, and you enter into Christ, and you are united with Christ, and Christ is in you, what does that say about my relationship with you? You see, this mystical union extends beyond our individual incorporation into Christ, but it becomes the foundation and the bond for the transcendent spiritual fellowship that all Christians enjoy with all other Christians.

And it also has a restraining impact upon us when we understand it, that if you are my brother or you are my sister, and Christ is in you, and you are in Christ, then whatever problems I have with you, I have to be able to understand that this union that we both share with Christ transcends those difficulties. And so this is not just a theoretical concept, but it does really spell out the depths and riches of that family that is a stronger family and a stronger tie and bond than even the biological families that we enjoy in this world. This is the fruit of our adoption.