THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF ADOPTION:
Biblical Theology of Adoption (Week 1)

INTRODUCTION

If you are a Christian, I hope you think often about the good news we call the gospel. The message of the gospel saves us and sustains us. When you think about what God has done for us through Christ, do you think about adoption? Adoption is the very heart of the gospel. J.I. Packer, in his marvelous book Knowing God, summarized the good news of Christianity in three words: adoption through propitiation. Now, propitiation is a large word that simply means a sacrifice that appeases God’s wrath against our sin. Jesus Christ, God’s own son, died on the cross to take the penalty we deserved. As the Apostle Peter put it, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). That’s propitiation. But Packer didn’t stop there. He said “adoption through propitiation.” Forgiveness of sins is not the point of the good news. God deals with our sins so that we might be really and truly adopted into his family. All Christians are adopted Christians.

It is appropriate then that we should take some time to think about this most marvelous topic. We’ll have several teachers over the coming weeks, but let me lay out the topics we are going to cover. This morning we are going to look at a biblical theology of adoption. Next week, Lord willing, we’ll give an overview of the adoption and foster process. The following week, we’ll talk about race and culture in adoption. The fourth week, we’ll talk about adoption parenting. The fifth week, we’ll lay out the vision for FBC’s adoption ministry and talk about how you can be involved. We’ll conclude the class with a panel discussion.

This biblical theme of adoption has great significance for the way we view our own relationship with God and the way we think about loving other people.

OUR ADOPTING GOD
When God speaks, things happen. Reality is created. So there was nothing and God said, “Let there be light.” It is the same as his words to David:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, 15 but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you” (2 Samuel 7:12-15).

I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. These are words of adoption. God speaks and it becomes so. A very similar thing happens when ordinary people like you and me adopt children. A judge speaks a decree and an orphaned child becomes truly a part of a family.

The 2 Samuel passage refers specifically to Israel’s King, but God also adopts the nation of Israel. God adopts a whole people for himself. Let’s look at that. Turn to Deuteronomy 7. God tells Israel after the Exodus that he chose them because he loved them. Would someone read Deuteronomy 7:7-10 aloud?

Deuteronomy 7:7-10  7 It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, 10 and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face.
So God chose a people for himself because of his love. Of course, Deuteronomy doesn’t explicitly call Israel God’s Son. We see that elsewhere. So Paul, in Romans 9:4, specifically says that to the Israelites “belong the adoption.” Or we could look at Jeremiah 3:19-20. Listen as I read:

**Jeremiah 3:19-20**  
19 "I said, How I would set you among my sons, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. 20 Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the LORD."

We see that Israel was an unfaithful, treacherous son, but God remained faithful. And he adopted a people for himself.

**GOD AND HIS CHILDREN**

God adopts. He takes lost people and brings them into his own house and seats them at his dinner table. What’s involved in God’s adoption of us? What does God do for us? I’d like to take some time to work through what God does for his children.

*God chooses his children.*

First, Christians are chosen by God to be his children. Turn with me to Ephesians chapter 1. Would someone read Ephesians 1:3-6 aloud for me?

**Ephesians 1:3-6**  
3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

We see these words like “chose” and “predestined” and “according to the purpose of his will.” What do they tell us about adoption? God did not adopt us on an impulse. This was at the very heart of God’s plan. This isn’t the only place Paul talks about God’s plan of adoption. So, for instance, in Galatians4 he says,
“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (vv.4-5).

It was God’s purpose and God’s will. And notice that there is nothing about choosing the best and the brightest. God does not sit like Donald Trump on The Apprentice and make people compete to join his team. God is motivated by love. No, even before he created the world he set his love upon some and said, “You will be my children.” That is what adoption means.

**How would grasping this truth shape our view of our own moral achievements?**

This demolishes pride. Let me ask you Christians, when you think about non-Christians, are you secretly proud that you’re not like them? Do you look at the way others live and say, “I would never do those things. I’m not like them.” Those are the thoughts of people who haven’t really understood the Bible’s teaching on adoption.

*God loves his children.*

God loves people. That you probably knew. But he doesn’t just love people, he loves them in a particular way. Listen as I read 1 John 3:1:

> **1 John 3:1** See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Notice that John talks here about the “kind of love” the Father has given to us. You might be using a translation that says something like, “See how great the Father’s love.” That is certainly true, but the ESV has a better translation. John is talking about the kind of love God gives us. We all know that there are different ways to love someone. “I love children” means something quite different from “I love my daughter.”

**What are the characteristics of this kind of love? How is it different than other kinds of love?** God loves us in a way that makes us his children. His love isn’t a one-time thing, it’s permanent. It creates a relationship.
I love what John does in 1 John 3 where he says, “And so we are.” We really are God’s children! It isn’t make believe. Families involved in adoption know that people will often say things like, “Is that your real child?” They may not mean to offend, but their language betrays what they’re thinking. Adopted kids aren’t real. For Christians, God answers that question, “Yes, they’re my real kids.”

*God gives his children new life through faith.*

God also gives his children new life through faith. The New Testament talks about this as being born again. Turn to John 1. Would someone read John 1:11-13 aloud?

**John 1:11-13**  
11 He [Jesus] came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.  
12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,  
13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

*What happens when we are born again? How are we different?* God gives us a new heart with new desires and the ability to obey him. We become new creations. One Old Testament prophet even uses the image of a heart of stone being exchanged for a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

*God blesses his children.*

God also blesses his children. All of us at least occasionally wonder how God feels about us. Does he really want to do good to us? Does he want to hear our prayers? Jesus speaks to this very clearly. If God is our Father, we can approach him with confidence and he will bless us. Listen as I read Matthew 7:7-11.

**Matthew 7:7-11**  
7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.  
8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.  
9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?  
10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?  
11 If you then, 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!
You see the argument Jesus makes. You people are awful, but even you take care of your children. God is good above all, he’ll certainly be more generous than any human Father.

**How does knowing God is our Father change the way we approach him? How would it be different if he were just our Lord but not our Father?**

*God disciplines his children.*

God also disciplines his children. Of course, this is just one of the ways that God loves and blesses his children. Discipline, rightly understood, is a sign of God’s love. It might not feel like it, but it is. Turn to Hebrews 12. **Would someone read Hebrews 12:5-11 aloud?**

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**Hebrews 12:5-11**  
5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.  
6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."  
7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?  
8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.  
9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?  
10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.  
11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

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**How does this doctrine of adoption change the way we experience God’s discipline? Think specifically about suffering in your life.** We are so easily tempted to think that God is lashing out at us, that he wants to hurt us. But we know he loves us. The pain he sends our way is for our good. The doctrine of adoption allows us to trust him and to patiently endure, confident that our suffering will be for our good.
God will give us an inheritance.

The fact that we are God’s children has lots of implications for how we approach him in prayer and understand suffering, but it also changes how we think about the future. For one thing, we know that we become his heirs. Just as our children inherit our wealth—or our debts, maybe!—we become heirs of God. The glory and joy that Christ receives through obedience will become ours too.

Romans 8:15-17  15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"  16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,  17 and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Notice that we are “fellow heirs with Christ.” We share in his inheritance.

God will make us perfect.

We also know that God will make us perfect. If we are trusting in Christ, we are really and truly God’s children, but we haven’t been perfected like he has. The Bible tells us that we will be made glorious and perfect. Can I get two readers? Can someone read Romans 8:23 and someone else read 1 John 3:2 aloud

Romans 8:23  23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

1 John 3:2  2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

Notice that in Romans 8 Paul talks about our adoption as something in the future. We have been adopted already, but it’s going to be completed and perfected when Christ comes back.
As adopted children of God, we will receive a glorious inheritance with Christ and we will be made perfect. **How do these realities transform the way we think about life in the here and now?** We have confidence that we can overcome sin and encouragement that the suffering and poverty of this life will one day give way to great riches. We can persevere with great hope.

This has been a pretty quick overview of a very rich theme in the Bible. **We’re going to talk about some applications in a moment, but does anyone have any questions or comments?**

**LOVING LIKE GOD LOVES**

We’ve already seen that God loves with an adoptive love. He reaches out and takes orphans and brings them into his own family. Think about the different relationships you have at work or in your neighborhood or the broader community. **What would it look like for us to love the way God loves?** Friends, I think we are all of us good at loving from a distance. But I worry sometimes that we’re too concerned about having tidy, safe lives that we seal off our homes from anything that could contaminate it. We try to do good while actively avoiding relational entanglements that might become burdensome down the road. Can you think of a way that you have loved like God recently?

One response to this is adoption and foster care. Since the earliest days of the Christian church, Christians have been caring for orphans. Pagans treated children as disposable. If they didn’t want a child, they would leave them out in an open field to die. Christians came along and scooped these children up and cared for them. What could be more natural for people who had been scooped up by God and raised as children?

I think one of the most important applications we can make from this great doctrine of adoption is that we should love others the way God has loved us. In Ephesians 5:1, Paul tells us, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.” Children like to imitate their parents. It’s just what kids do. We are really and truly God’s children. It is no metaphor or fantasy. If we are going to imitate God, we will have to love like God.
First Baptist is launching a ministry this year to promote adoption and foster care among our members. You’re going to be hearing lot more about that in weeks to come, but I’d like you to already be thinking about how you can be involved. Trust me, I get the challenges involved. This kind of love is always costly, risky, and disruptive. But it is the kind of love God has shown us.

Flynn told me a story about years ago visiting an orphanage in Russia. He played soccer with some young boys and they were fighting with one another for the privilege of holding his hand. They didn’t have anyone to hold their hand. Those boys didn’t need someone to play soccer with. They needed someone to love them like God has loved us. If Christians won’t love them that way, people who themselves have been adopted, who will?

As we close, I’d like to pose a few more questions.

- **What are some practical ways we can grow in loving adoptively? What are some things we can do in the days and weeks to come?**

- **What are barriers we face in loving this way?**

- **What could our church do to become an adopting church? How can we promote a culture of God imitating adoption?**

CLOSE IN PRAYER