

Just as immature sons appear as slaves while being kept under strict guardianship for their inheritance, so also God’s children were kept for a time under his law for their future inheritance. In the fullness of time, the Father sent his Son Jesus to redeem and adopt us from under the law. So live as heirs of God!

Introduction – Did you know genealogy is a 3-billion-dollar industry? Story of “legendary” relatives.

Background – Paul’s letter to the Galatian church has been likened to spiritual dynamite. This group of Christians had forgotten the gospel of finding approval and acceptance in God through Christ’s completed ministry. Now they were adding to the gospel a way of keeping God’s approval and acceptance by collecting religious identity markers and obeying rules. Paul won the Galatians back to the gospel by reminding them of the doctrine of sonship, which exploded their pride and conquered their fears.

I. The Need of Gospel Sonship

A. Metaphor 1: graduation from law-school (vv. 3:23-27)

No single English word connotes the sense meant by the Greek word for guardian in verses 24 and 25 (*paidagogos*). In the ancient world, this “pedagogue” was a slave entrusted by the master of the house to personally steward his little boy to maturity (1 Cor 4:15). It should go without saying that under a pedagogue’s tutelage, a boy longed for the day of his freedom. The guardian accompanied the free-born child wherever he went and acted as tutor to teach the son practical life lessons in being a proper heir. He was not a “schoolmaster” or academic instructor, but was put in charge of the master’s heir as his protector, supervisor, and childcare provider. Ancient drawings show the pedagogue brandishing a rod in hand, sort of like the proverbial nun wielding a ruler to keep her students in line. Paul’s point is metaphorical: the law was a pedagogue for a set time in the life/history of God’s people until Christ came when law-school graduation day finally arrived!

B. Metaphor 1a: redemption from law-slavery (vv. 4:1-5)

Even though these chapter 4 verses don’t include the word for pedagogue, “guardians and managers” describe duties that the pedagogue exercised over the son for his master. Paul is developing this thought: though the immature son is the future heir of everything, until freed from the rule of his pedagogue, he feels like the slave of a slave! Now shifting a bit to develop the slavery idea: slaves don’t just grow up to become sons. Slaves need redemption to get their freedom from being enslaved. So to put the metaphor all together: at one time we were in a sense enslaved to God’s law, which is described as the “elementary principles of the world.” The elementary principles are not gods by nature, and they are powerless and worthless after Christ has come. They enslaved God’s people who lived under the old covenant by making them observe holy days, months, seasons, and years (Gal 4:8-10). We might say they are the ABCs of the Jewish lifestyle as practiced under the OT law. Notice those things were all commanded by God and thus are good, right, and true in the ways they teach about and point forward to the coming of Christ.

II. The Enemy of Gospel Sonship

A. Tribal acceptance: a “Judaized” faith (vv. 3:28-29)

Tragically, not everyone uses the law properly. If it is abused, the law can provide an idolatrous counterfeit of the acceptance and approval we all need. Consider matters of race, class, and sex. Human identity markers cannot justify a person (declare him acceptable) before God. Rooting your core identity in whatever your preferred tribe—whether it be the color of your skin, or your ancestral country, or your amount of wealth, or your social class standing, or your political party, or your God-

assigned sex—is to make the same error as the Judaizers. In other words, they argued for a return to the many distinctions in God’s OT economy between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, son and servant, heir and non-heir.

B. Performance approval: a “Legalized” faith (v. 4:3; cf. 4:8-11)

Maybe you’re less a “group acceptance guy” and more of an approval junkie? You too can abuse the law and become an enemy of gospel sonship. Consider matters of rule-keeping. Moral performance markers don’t matter for gaining God’s approval, because they cannot sanctify a person (earn him approval) before God. Not only are the elementary principles of the OT religious lifestyle bankrupt ways to gain approval from God, but keeping the OT moral law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, also cannot gain you approval from God. Legalists wrongly believe they can keep the law, and so they become enslaved to it as a means of securing one’s identity, worth, and approval. Let me tell you the dirty little secret about the performance approval track. You can’t thrive as a slave to the law. Because the law is a master who will never give approval: “Good job, but what have you done for me lately?” And it’s a master who will never accept you: “That was OK, but remember all the times you failed?”

III. The Power of Gospel Sonship

A. The Son’s approval is yours by faith (vv. 3:26-27; 4:4-5a)

Christ was born of woman to share the human condition with those he was sent forth to redeem. He was born under the law to share in our obligation to fulfill the law (Mt 3:13-15; 5:17). The Son of God took on flesh to become the man Jesus Christ as he was born into this condition, yet without sin himself but still experiencing the outward effects of sin in this world. He subjected himself to the elementary principles of this world, and took upon himself the curse of the law that fell on sinners (Gal 3:10, 13). By doing so he set believers free from the law’s confining and condemning rule: freeing us from our pedagogue and redeeming us from our imprisoned condition. What a Redeemer! For all this Jesus the Son of God gained the approval of God his Father. That is the good news of gospel sonship. When you put your trust in what Jesus did for sinners, you are baptized into Christ, which is to say you have put on Christ and thus gain all the approval that Jesus won through his obedience to the law.

B. The Father’s acceptance is yours by adoption (vv. 4:5b-7)

To whom did Jesus Christ pay our redemption price? Not to the devil, for God himself incurred the sin-debt that resulted in our slavery. The Father, through the precious blood of his Son Jesus, paid the debt to himself (Mt 20:28)! The redemption price that was paid by God and to God secured for every single one of God’s people the full rights and privileges of sons. You are adopted into God’s family to share in the same inheritance that belongs to Christ. “*Abba*, Father” is the cry of Christ’s Spirit from our hearts to our beloved heavenly Papa. Jesus called out in intimate affection to his beloved Father, and he teaches and enables us to cry out as adopted sons to his Father and our Father.

Conclusion – Martin Luther penned one of history’s great commentaries on Galatians. No one grasped the meaning of sonship more than Luther, and its ecstasies of God’s acceptance and approval radically transformed his life. Listen to Luther for a taste of the glories of sonship. “If a person could fully appreciate what it means to be a son and heir of God, he would rate the might and wealth of nations small change in comparison with his heavenly inheritance. What is the world to him who has heaven? No wonder Paul greatly desired to depart and to be with Christ. Nothing would be more welcome to us than early death, knowing that it would spell the end of all our miseries and the beginning of all our happiness. Yes, if a person could perfectly believe this he would not long remain alive. The anticipation of his joy would kill him.” Does God’s free acceptance and full approval of you erupt in the heart cry, “*Abba*, Father”? It will to the degree you realize that, Christian, you are a son.