



The Good in the Gospel

Why The Gospel Matters
Before You Die

Kyle Edwards

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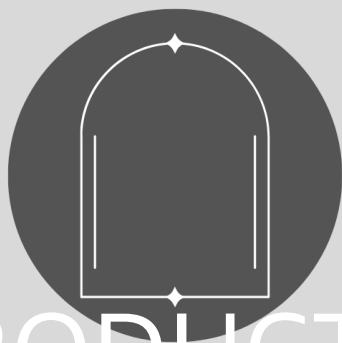
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INTRODUCTION

You're walking down the street minding your own business. A man in an expensive-looking suit approaches. You think he'll pass by, but instead he stops and asks the craziest question you've ever heard: "At some point far into the future, I will give you one trillion dollars. Would you like to accept this gift?"

After a moment of staring dumbly, you remember you've heard other people tell similar stories about this man. You know what will happen next. If you say No, the mystery man turns and walks away. If you say Yes, he gives you the receipt promising payment and then turns and walks away. You have so many questions, and you've heard about other people who've accepted the receipt, but you don't know any other details, and as far as you know, no one has received any actual money yet.

Would you accept the promise of a trillion bucks? Many people wouldn't. It sounds too good to be true. Normal people don't come across impossibly vast sums of money in real life. You check Wikipedia later and find out that it's more money than the GDP of the Netherlands. We're too skeptical to be taken in. Other people might be more inclined to say Yes to the money,

but getting rich later doesn't help with their problems right now. What good is a trillion dollars in the future if you can't afford good health care right now and die before you ever get paid? Still other people might look around at the folks who took the receipts and notice a disturbing lack of character. If that's the kind of person who says Yes, then I'm going to say No.

Now let's imagine the strange benefactor persuades you to say Yes to the offer. What happens next? Some people might completely neglect all their personal and professional obligations in anticipation of their coming windfall. What's the point of holding down a job, patiently parenting a struggling teenager, or voting, if the future holds such life-altering goodness?

Another possibility is that your hope in the gift might fizzle over time. Year after year goes by without any word from the generous stranger, and doubts start to fester. Was I a fool to say Yes? Did it ever really happen, or was I dreaming? Perhaps it isn't doubt but forgetfulness that settles in. An economic recession, a cancer diagnosis, the painful breakdown of a marriage, or any other of life's snowballing troubles crowd out memories of that first encounter, and one day you find the receipt wadded up in a jacket pocket. "Oh, I had forgotten all about that," you say before throwing the receipt away.

It's extremely unlikely that anyone will be offering you a trillion dollars anytime soon, and still less likely that such a person could ever fulfill such a promise. No single person in the world today owns such an astronomical sum. But the God who created and owns the universe and every particle in it is neither bound by financial constraints nor by cold-hearted miserliness. The good news announced in the Bible (the word "gospel" means "good news") is that even though every person has turned away from God, he loved us still and sent his only Son, Jesus, to live

the life we were meant to live and die the death we were meant to die. God raised him from the dead, and Jesus is alive today, and anyone who trusts him is forgiven for everything and promised eternal life with him and unending joy in him.

Is this good news just like the offer of a trillion dollars? Many people say that it is. Some people ignore or reject it because it sounds too good to be true. We should just accept the fact that we're all alone in the universe, we've only got one life to live, and when we die, we no longer exist, so might as well make the most of the time we've got. Other people take an appraising look at Christians—those who claim to believe the gospel—and conclude that Christianity suffers from a crucial lack of moral credibility. Why drink the Kool-Aid if it means joining in with other people who seem so willing to abandon principle for power?

On the other end of the spectrum are those Christians who believe the gospel fervently yet can't conceptualize how the gospel matters for the Christian life now. Heaven is coming, so why worry about climate change or poverty rates? Why should I invest my emotional, physical, and financial resources in thankless activities like checking in on the widow on Medicare across the street when I could be golfing instead? I've got my "heaven guaranteed" receipt, so that's all that really matters.

And then there are the reluctant doubters. We believe the gospel and follow Jesus with joy, but over time life gets harder and busier, and our spiritual spark grows dimmer. One day we wonder what our old faith was all about. Closely akin to the doubters are the forgetters. The spark grows dim without us ever realizing it because so much of our energy and attention is focused on getting by and getting through.

Whether we ignore, misuse, doubt, or forget the gospel, each of these misses the full goodness of the good news. Yes, the gospel does announce the promise of eternal life, as Jesus himself said: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). But the gospel is also very good news now.

My hope in these pages is to show this present goodness. I hope to show how the gospel strengthens our hearts in the love of Jesus, strengthens our minds in the knowledge of our true identity, and strengthens our hands for everyday love and faithfulness.

We’ll take our cue from Christians who came before us. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, drafted in London in the 1640s, asks, “What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?”¹ Effectual calling is God’s work in converting us to faith in Jesus. In other words, the Catechism is asking what benefits do people whom God has saved by grace enjoy in this present life? Here’s the answer: “They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them.” These three gospel blessings—justification, adoption, and sanctification—are the big right now treasures of the gospel. Justification—how God forgives us and shouts out our new status; adoption—how he takes us into his family and becomes our Father; sanctification—how he shapes us into the people we were always meant to be: these are the beautiful treasures that we don’t have to wait for. Let’s look at each in turn and discover just how good the good news is.

1 Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 32.



JUSTIFICATION

A number of years ago, during a particularly difficult and vulnerable season in my life, I ran my mouth off. I composed an email in a fit of anger and embitterment that was condescending, unfair, and mean. The recipients of said email were leaders at my church who disagreed with me on a certain matter but who nonetheless cared deeply for me. Their response to me was gentle but direct. I was wrong, and my words had done damage.

I apologized, they forgave me, and we moved on. Chances are they've long forgotten that episode, but I remember it mainly for what came after the email exchange: overwhelming, crushing guilt. How could I have said that? It was more than embarrassing. I wanted to be buried in a hole and hide from the accusations, even though those accusations were coming most loudly from within.

Some would say that these feelings of guilt are just vestigial organs of a religious past that we've long evolved away from. People used to be terrified that God would strike them dead

for not praying enough or going to church. We don't believe in that stuff anymore; we can surgically remove our inflamed guilt appendix.

Except that it doesn't always work like that. Literary critic Merve Emre says, "At moments when guilt or shame threaten our conscience, when they shake our deepest beliefs about who we are, petty lies stop us from looking too closely at ourselves."¹ Could it be that this ill-defined nagging sense of guilt comes from the fact that we are actually, objectively guilty?

One police detective on HBO's *True Detective* says, "Look—everybody knows there's something wrong with them. They just don't know what it is. Everybody wants confession, everybody wants some cathartic narrative for it. The guilty especially. And everybody's guilty."²

Novelist Francis Spufford calls this "The Human Propensity to Screw Things Up," except that he uses a more colorful word than "screw."

In the end, almost everyone recognizes this as one of the truths about themselves.... Our appointment with realization often comes at one of the classic moments of adult failure: when a marriage ends, when a career stalls or crumbles, when a relationship fades with with a child seen only on Saturdays, when the supposedly recreational coke habit turns out to be exercising veto powers over every other hope and dream.

It need not be dramatic, though. It can equally well just be the drifting into place of one more pleasant, indistinguishable little atom of wasted time, one more morning like all the others, which quietly discloses you to yourself. You're lying in the bath and you notice that you're thirty-nine and that the way you're living bears scarcely any resemblance to what you think you've always wanted; yet you got here by choice, by a long series of choices for things which, at any

1 *The Atlantic*, Sept 2020, p. 83.

2 Quoted in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 105.

one moment, temporarily outbid the things you say
you wanted most....
You have indeed, [screwed] things up. Of course you have.
You're human, and that's where we live; that's our normal
experience.³

This human propensity to screw things up is what the Bible calls sin. The problem is actually worse than Spufford describes.

We haven't just harmed ourselves or other people. We have sinned against God. We've turned away from our Maker and loving Father, and every screw-up is ultimately a rejection of him and a failure to be what he made us to be. As the 20th-century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck put it,

When they compare themselves with others or measure themselves by the standard that they apply to themselves or among each other, they have some reason perhaps to pride themselves in something and to put their trust in. But when they put themselves before the face of God and examine themselves in the mirror of his holy law, all their conceit collapses, all self-confidence melts, and there is room left only for the prayer: 'Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.'⁴

The Bible on Justification

It's this blessed forgiveness that's at the heart of the biblical doctrine of justification. The Bible speaks at length on justification, especially the apostle Paul's writings in Romans 2–4 and Galatians 2–3, but I'd like to examine two places that paint a picture of justification rather than discourse upon it. The first is Zechariah 3:1–5 in the Old Testament. This is a vision given to God's people who've only just returned from exile. The reason

3 Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic*, p. 28.

4 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, p. 204

they were in exile to begin with was a long list of screw-ups. But God's going to do something about that.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD was standing by.

Joshua, the high priest, represents all the people. They are all guilty. Satan may be the world's biggest liar, but in this case, his accusations of the people's guilt are on the mark. Notice how this guilt is depicted as filth, particularly dirty clothes. Psychologists have long observed that we often feel compelled to literally bathe ourselves after doing something for which we feel guilty. God's people are dirty, unclean—but then comes the moment of justification. The dirty clothes are removed, and new, clean clothes are put on. Joshua, and the people he embodies, are forgiven, clean on the inside, not just the outside. Notice most crucially of all that Joshua doesn't do any of the cleansing himself, nor does he do anything to prompt God's decision to give him new clothes. His new wardrobe—his new status as clean and forgiven—comes entirely by the initiation and action of God.

C. S. Lewis's book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, vividly describes this transformation. The boy Eustace has been turned into a dragon, which is quite fitting considering his unpleasant, even dragonish personality. He tries to peel away his dragon scales and return to

his original form, but he can't do it. The dragon skin goes too deep. Aslan, the great lion (and symbol for Jesus), then says that only he can peel away the skin. Eustace says, "The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt." But after Aslan has torn off all the skin, he swims in his true skin, which feels "perfectly delicious."⁵ Our old clothes, our dragon skin, has to come off. We need new clothes, new skin, and only Jesus can dress us properly.

Put all that together. This picture of justification shows forgiveness and the removal of guilt that Joshua receives as a gift.

One more portrait, this time in the New Testament. Jesus tells this parable in Luke 18:9–14:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Jesus frames the parable as a lesson against trusting in one's own righteousness, and the character who personifies self-trust is a Pharisee. Pharisees were a devout and spiritually rigorous group who had little affection for the ruling Roman Empire. The Pharisee's polar opposite is the tax collector, an ethical-

5 C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, pp. 474–75 in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

ly unscrupulous man who collaborates with the Romans and profits from his tax collecting business by skimming some off the top. The more taxes he collects, the more he can siphon off for himself.

Our modern sensibilities are trained to label the Pharisee as the bad guy (we use “Pharisee” as an insult) and to identify with the tax collector who’s made some mistakes but wants to make up for it. When we think of the Pharisee as the bad guy and the tax collector as the good guy, we miss how shocking Jesus’ parable is. The original audience would have seen the Pharisee as the good guy. His self-assessment isn’t wrong: he really is just, sexually pure, and generous with his money. He’s not in bed with the hated Romans. The tax collector, on the other hand, hasn’t just made some mistakes. He’s thoroughly corrupt. He profits off Jewish exploitation. Nearly everyone hates him.

It’s shocking, then, that the genuinely bad guy is justified, not the genuinely good guy. Why? Because justification isn’t about being good or religious. It’s about God’s grace to forgive sinners. The Pharisee’s problem isn’t that he’s not as good as he thinks he is. His problem is that he trusts in his own goodness. The tax collector, however, can do nothing but cry out for mercy. There’s nothing good in himself he can rely on. He has faith, in other words. He doesn’t trust himself; he trusts in a God who forgives.

Defining Justification

Let us put these two portraits together so we can see more clearly what justification is all about. Justification is how God forgives guilty sinners and gives them a new righteous, clean status. He does it entirely out of his own grace, and the only way to receive it is by trusting God, which is what faith is. Of course, these two portraits don’t tell us everything about justification. The Westminster Confession of Faith defines jus-

tification as “an act of God’s free grace, where he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by grace alone.”⁶ The crucial piece we haven’t considered yet is that the way God removes our guilt is by giving his innocent Son to die for us as if He were the guilty one. Our new, clean robes are Jesus’ clean robes given to us. He takes our guilt and gives us his righteousness. We are justified in Jesus.

This is the first great gospel blessing. It doesn’t come into effect later after we die and it doesn’t only apply to something in our past. Anyone who trusts in Jesus is a forgiven person right now.

Justification Today

But does justification even make sense to us today? Three points about justification are often at odds with modern life: faith, forgiveness, and justice.

Faith. Consider faith, first of all. Our culture shouts faith’s virtues all the time. James Cameron, the director of *Titanic*, *Avatar*, and other blockbuster films, has said, “There are too many talented people who haven’t fulfilled their dreams because they overthought it, or they were too cautious, or were unwilling to make the leap of faith.” Faith in this sense is the belief that everything will work out for you if you just do your best and take risks in order to optimize professional and personal success. The faith that receives the gift of God’s justifying grace is so much different than Cameron’s ode to doing great things with your life. Justifying faith says that you can do nothing; God must do everything. It’s receiving a gift that you did not and can never earn. We don’t like being told that. We want to achieve. Our culture says we must achieve.

This culture of achievement has been called meritocracy: “a

system, organization, or society in which people are chosen and moved into positions of success, power, and influence on the basis of their demonstrated abilities and merit.”⁷ A prominent public high school in Chicago whose mascot is the Dolphins touts to parents of prospective students that “Dolphins rule the world.”⁸ If you’re smart enough to get into the school and work hard enough while there, you will rule—virtually the definition of meritocracy. But what does this achievement culture do to us? Yale Law School professor David Markovitz observes that “meritocracy traps entire generations inside demeaning fears and inauthentic ambitions: always hungry but never finding, or even knowing, the right food.”⁹ We must achieve, and along the way, it burns us out and sucks us dry.

Justification, on the other hand, announces a gift that you can never achieve, and the only way to get it is to lean on the achievement of someone else entirely—Jesus Christ. He lived the life we were meant to live. He died the death we were meant to die for our failures and rebellion. We can’t achieve forgiveness and righteousness. Jesus already has. He gives us this loving, generous gift. To receive and trust without earning or achieving anything—that’s justifying faith.

Forgiveness. The second way justification runs against cultural forces is in its declaration of our free forgiveness. The journalist Elizabeth Bruenig tweeted, “As a society we have no coherent story—none whatsoever—about how a person can atone, make amends, and retain some continuity between their life before and after the mistake.”¹⁰ If you make a mistake that’s particu-

7 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, “Meritocracy,” accessed February 16, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meritocracy>.

8 I learned this in conversation with a parent of a prospective student.

9 Markovits, Daniel. “How Life Became an Endless, Terrible Competition.” *The Atlantic*, September 1, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/09/meritocracys-miserable-winners/594760/>.

10 Bruenig appears to have deleted all of her past tweets, but this tweet is quoted in <https://www.vox.com/22969804/forgiveness-gibson-logan-paul-jk-rowling>.

larly heinous, according to the unwritten rules of social media discourse, you must apologize and repent ... and you will never be forgiven. Both left and right cancel the guilty instantly and eternally. In other words, if you commit the wrong crime, there is no forgiveness.

Justification, on the other hand, declares complete and total forgiveness for every sin because every sin committed by one who trusts in Jesus has been paid for and canceled out by his death on the cross. Yes, the harmful effects of sin on oneself and other people need addressing, which is part of the work of repentance. But the believer in Jesus wears Jesus' righteous robes, which shout, "Forgiven!"

Justice. The third point of tension between justification and our culture is in regards to justice. Justification is about justice. You can see it in the word itself. God acts justly; he satisfies his justice in Jesus' death to secure our righteousness. Our culture, too, is extremely concerned about justice. The death of George Floyd, an African American man, at the hands of a white police officer in May 2020 ignited a spasm of revolt—some of it healthy, some of it destructive—for greater justice. Yet few would say that society has become substantially more just since the tumultuous summer of 2020. Justyn Terry, Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, said that our culture is extremely concerned with justice but has no idea how to get there.¹¹

Justification, however, shows us a God who does justice. He declares us just through Christ, even though in ourselves, the very best of us can never be completely just and fair in all our dealings with others. Jesus satisfies justice, we're declared just, and as a consequence, we respond by living more justly and mercifully to others with God's help. Doing justice starts with our justification.

All of this makes the gospel a beautiful treasure we can enjoy

¹¹ This is a paraphrase from memory. I was present when Dr. Terry preached in a chapel service at Wycliffe Hall in late 2021.

and live by right now. Few know this better than Nicky Cruz, a member of a violent street gang in New York City in the 1950s. It took him a while to believe the gospel, but when he did, he became a very effective minister and evangelist. He wrote, “I saw that You had the power to squash me like a bug, and instead you poured out Your blood to save me, to love me, to heal my aching heart.”¹² My own story is much less dramatic than Cruz’s. I’ve never been in a gang. I grew up going to church. Got Bible degrees in college and graduate school. Now I’m a pastor. But I’m also a guy who can shoot off a petulant, angry email that hurts people who care about me. I can disappoint friends, family, and colleagues. I can disappoint myself and feel crushed by guilt and shame. But the treasure of gospel justification says that I’m forgiven because of Jesus, not because of me. Justification says that my own failures are not the final word. And when you trust in Jesus for the first time or for a lifetime the same is true of you.

12 Quoted in Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*, p. 35.



ADOPTION

Winston Churchill had terrible parents. His mother was an American socialite, and his father was a politician from an aristocratic and storied family. Both were scandal-prone disasters whose attitudes to their lively son were very light on affection and very high on disappointment. His father died when Winston was twenty, believing his son would never amount to anything.

Later in his own life, Winston shared with his family a dream he had recently. In his dream, he was visited by the ghost of his father, who asked him about all of the political and historical events that had happened since his death. Winston reported on the two world wars and much else besides. The most revealing part of the dream, though, is that not once does Winston tell his father of his own central role in those events, most notably as Britain's Prime Minister during World War Two. It was as if, even then, after a lifetime of remarkable achievement, his father still would not believe that his son could be worthy of the family name.

Such crushing parental failures afflict many people. Others who enjoy healthy relationships with their parents can still feel the absence of other relationships. Life can be lonely. Does anyone truly love and know us? Where do we belong? Who are we?

The gospel answers these questions. The second great blessing

of the gospel to consider is the doctrine of adoption. Through Jesus God adopts believers as his own children, giving them a loving Father who knows them and gives them a place in his family forever. Here's how the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines it: "Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God."¹ Like justification, adoption is a present reality. J. I. Packer (whom we will hear more from later) even says that "our first point about adoption is that it is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification."² Let's examine what the Bible says about this lofty privilege and then we'll highlight what it means for our lives now.

What the Bible Says About Adoption

The Bible doesn't have as much to say about adoption compared to other doctrines, but it does have plenty to say about how God is our Father. Here's one example. When God gives Moses to give Pharaoh the message to release the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, he does so as a jealous father moving mountains for his children: "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me.' If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son'" (Exodus 4:22–23). That fatherly perspective pervades the rest of the Old Testament, but when we come to the New Testament, we find that one person above all lays claim to the title "Son." When Mark introduces Jesus, he spotlights God's dramatic pronouncement, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased (Mark 1:11). But just because Jesus is God's Son in a singularly unique way doesn't mean the rest of God's people stop being his children. On the contrary, it's through Jesus the Son of God that God's people become sons and daughters of their heavenly Father. John says, "But to all who did receive him, who believed

1 Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 34.

2 J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 206.

in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

Let’s pause here to sit with this wonderful truth. Through Jesus, God is our Father. We are his children. In some church traditions, it’s common to speak of the importance of having a personal relationship with Jesus. That’s not necessarily an incorrect idea; however, it perhaps misses the key point of a Christian’s relationship to God: that of a beloved son or daughter to a loving Father. J. I. Packer says that this gets to the very heart of the gospel and the Christian life:

What is a Christian? The answer can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father... If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father.

God is the Father of Jesus Christ uniquely—indeed, he is God the Son—and followers of Jesus become God’s children through Jesus. But there’s one final piece to the puzzle. The mechanism by which we become God’s children is adoption. Before looking at what the Bible says directly about adoption, we should first understand how adoption functioned in the broader world and culture in which the New Testament was written. In our culture the adoptee is almost always a child. In the first-century Greco-Roman world, on the other hand, the adoptee was usually an adult male. Caesar Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire and who was on the throne when Jesus was born, was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. That’s why he took the name “Caesar.” Scholars of ancient Roman culture describe the process this way:

The resulting effect of adoption “was to place the adopted person for all legal purposes in the same position as if he had been a natural child in the potestas [parental authority] of the adopter. The adopted son took his adoptive father’s

name and rank. He acquired rights of succession on death in his new family and lost all such rights as he had in his old family.”³

With that background in mind, listen to what the Apostle Paul says about our adoption by our heavenly Father in Romans 8:14–17:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 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!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 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.

We can’t say everything that could be said about this marvelous passage, but the central point is that through God’s Holy Spirit—who is the Spirit of adoption—we are brought into a new relationship with God in which he is truly our Father. Indeed, we can justifiably call him Father, Abba. “Abba” is roughly equivalent to the modern “Dad”; not quite as informal as “Daddy,” since adult children also called their older fathers “Abba,” but still a term of close familiarity and intimacy. Someone shared with me that a Jewish friend of hers has a refrigerator magnet that says, “World’s Best Abba.” That captures the word’s meaning just about as well as anything! Abba, Dad, Father: that is who he is, and we are his sons and daughters who enjoy all the privileges of being his children.

By calling this adoption, Paul is insisting that this is a different situation than was originally the case. I am an adoptive father myself, which certainly makes me particularly sensitive to the significance of this doctrine. My oldest son Duncan was born in Uganda. My second son Charlie was born in Chicago. Neither are my biological children. Neither share any of my DNA. Nei-

3 Berger and Nicholas, quoted in Trevor Burke, *Adopted into God’s Family*, p. 69.

ther looks very much like me. My youngest son Winston is my biological son, and he does look like me. But adoption means that Duncan and Charlie are every bit my sons, just as much as Winston is. They're my sons legally. More importantly, they're my sons in my eyes, and you better believe I will fight to the death for them. Adoption makes someone who wasn't a son or daughter truly a son or daughter.

So also for us and our heavenly Abba. Theologian Gerald Bray draws out this connection:

The image of adoption is a particularly well chosen one because it illustrates, in a way that nothing else can, the nature of our relationship with God in Christ. An adopted child is not the mutual offspring of his adoptive parents, but neither is his presence in the household an accident. His parents have deliberately chosen him and made him a member of their family by an act of will that is sealed in love and self-sacrifice.⁴

We had been enslaved to sin and death, but God rescued us out of that enslavement and brought us into his household where we truly belong.

What Our Adoption Means for Us Now

Now let's draw out the implications of our adoption, of which there are four primary ones: our acceptance, our identity, our Christian life, and our suffering.

1. Adoption says that we are loved and accepted. Trevor Burke, in his survey of the Bible's teaching on adoption, says, "If adoption is about anything it is about belonging, a belonging where God as Father occupies centre stage in his 'family.'"⁵ Even those of us with the healthiest friendships, marriages, or family relationships can still be haunted by the fear that no one really knows us deep down, that no one loves us unconditionally, that

4 Gerald Bray, *God is Love*, p. 643

5 Burke, p. 73.

no place will ever be truly home.

That's especially true for those who are burdened with unhealthy relationships or the absence of meaningful relationships. The philosopher James K. A. Smith writes how his father and stepfather both abandoned him in his youth and never looked back, but later he joyfully discovered the love of a new Father:

Suffice it to say, neither my father nor my stepfather has come looking for me. But a Father did. At the heart of the madness of the gospel is an almost unbelievable mystery that speaks to a deep human hunger only intensified by a generation of broken homes: to be seen and known and loved by a father. Maybe navigating the tragedy and heart-break of this fallen world is realizing this hunger might not be met by the ones we expect or hope will come looking for us, but then meeting a Father who adopts you, who chooses you, who sees you a long way off and comes running and says, "I've been waiting for you."⁶

J. I. Packer, whom we heard from earlier and is an adoptive father himself, puts it this way:

The establishing of the child's status as a member of the family is only a beginning. The real task remains: to establish a genuinely filial relationship between your adopted child and yourself. It is this, above all, that you want to see. Accordingly, you set yourself to win the child's love by loving the child. You seek to excite affection by showing affection. So with God. And throughout our life in this world, and to all eternity beyond, he will constantly be showing us, in one way or another, more and more of his love, and thereby increasing our love to him continually. The prospect before the adopted children of God is an eternity of love.⁷

An eternity of love—is there any greater treasure in all the world?

2. Adoption speaks to our identity. Who are we? Novelist

6 James K. A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine*, p. 201.

7 Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 216.

Zadie Smith captures the oftentimes shallowness of our answers in her book *The Autograph Man*. Alex, her 27-year-old protagonist, “was emotionally undeveloped, he supposed, like most Western kids. He was probably in denial of death. He was certainly suspicious of enlightenment. Above all, he liked to be entertained.” If our sense of identity isn’t quite so shallow, though, it’s likely unbearably burdensome. We can try to find our identity in our work which simultaneously wears us out and fails to satisfy. In an article on the ubiquitousness of work-related messaging services like Slack, Ellen Cushing writes,

A fun workplace is one you want to spend time at, and also one that contributes to your sense of identity. “We’re like sharks who are sleeping with one eye open,” says the design researcher Simone Stolzoff: never fully invested in leisure or in work. The problem with that state, he said—other than the fact that it is completely exhausting—is that “it doesn’t give us containers to figure out who we are when we’re not working.”

Alan Noble argues that this phenomenon isn’t just oriented to work; our culture at every point insists on identity as personal expression, with disastrous results. He calls this “the Responsibilities of Self-Belonging. We don’t belong to anyone but ourselves. We call this freedom, but instead it’s bondage to personal performance and identity-defining expression that leaves us feeling exhausted and inadequate. “In this sense,” Noble says, “the promise of society is more like a warning: You will keep searching, keep expressing, keep redefining, keep striving for your autonomous personhood until you die.”⁸

Those are our two options: our identity is marked by a terrible shallowness or terrible weight, if not both simultaneously. Can you understand why our adoption is such good news for understanding our identity? It’s not shallow at all—you’re a son or daughter of the Creator of the universe! And it’s not a crushing burden to perform—your Father did the adopting, not you.

That's who you are!

3. Your adoption very practically speaks to your Christian life. Why should you obey God's commands in the Bible? Why should you follow Jesus when it gets hard? Is it because if you don't, God's going to kick you to the curb? No! God is your Father, not a despotic judge. He's your Abba, not your employer. If I don't do my job, I'm going to get fired. But if I didn't do my chores growing up, I'd certainly get in trouble, but there was never any question about my place in the family. In fact, the healthier my relationships with my mom and dad were, the more I wanted to please and obey them. So the more we understand our adoption, the more Christian obedience becomes a joyful privilege rather than a burdensome obligation. Gerald Bray calls this the family business: "If we are members of God's family, then the family business becomes our business as well, and we must do what we can to represent it and further it as much as possible."⁹

4. Our adoption speaks to our suffering. Paul makes this point immediately after the verses considered above:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 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. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Frustration and pain mark not only our own lives but the entire

9 Bray, *God is Love*, p. 644.

creation, yet it's in that very pain where we long for redemption and healing. In this sense Paul speaks of our adoption as a future event. It's a personal reality now to be sure, yet its full impact will be felt one day at the end of history when God heals the world and makes it new. In the meantime, we "wait for it with patience" (v. 25, but it's a very hopeful waiting, since the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of adoption, remember—"intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (v. 26). Our adoption, therefore, points us to the end of our suffering and strengthens us now in our suffering through the Holy Spirit's prayers on our behalf. Yes, we suffer; but we suffer in hope as sons and daughters.

Concluding Thoughts

My own dad, who died in the spring of 2020, was the opposite of Winston Churchill's father (and my mother, too, is the opposite of Churchill's mother!). I had a wonderful, supportive, loving father. He was a highly respected, successful, and busy CEO of a not-for-profit that served people with disabilities and their families, but somehow I don't remember being too busy or important for me.

One summer day during my lunch break, I decided on a whim to visit my dad at his work. I walked in the door and told the receptionist who I was. I then walked into his office as someone tracked down my dad elsewhere in the building. Moments later he quickly walked in, worried that something was wrong. When I told him that nothing was wrong and I just wanted to have lunch with him, his face lit up with happiness. I have no idea what he had on his schedule at that moment, but whatever it was, he canceled it and took me out to lunch.

That was the privilege I enjoyed as his son. I could show up unannounced, make him buy me lunch, and it would be the highlight of both our days. We have an even greater privilege as children of our heavenly Father. Not only do we get to barge in on him, and not only does he want us to barge in, but by adoption through the death of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit of adoption, he has done all the work of making this privilege a blessing for us to enjoy today.



SANCTIFICATION

In 2011 a video was posted on YouTube of a homeless man in Columbus, Ohio. The man was Ted Williams, more often known as The Man with the Golden Voice (and not to be confused with the hall-of-fame baseball player of the same name). Williams had once worked in radio; his “golden voice” was perfect for it. But here he was asking for money on the side of the road. The video showed Williams showcasing his voice while holding a sign asking for money. The video quickly went viral, and before long, Williams was booked on The Today Show and other national media outlets. It was the perfect feel-good story: an exceptionally gifted man who had fallen on hard times now risen from the ashes into a hopeful future.

Except that the story wasn't so simple. Escaping the drug addiction that had been instrumental in his homelessness proved extremely difficult for Williams. In the years since the video that made him famous, he's gone through cycles of sobriety, addiction, and rehab. By all appearances, he's worked extremely hard to live with healthier habits and relationships; his efforts, though, haven't always been successful.

Ted Williams' story is much more human than what Hollywood would script. We see ourselves in him. Can we change? Can we become different people? Better people? Kinder people? Or, in our most honest moments, are we vaguely bothered that we're more interested in becoming wealthier, more successful, fitter people?

The gospel speaks to this very human story. Its treasures haven't been exhausted by justification and adoption. Theologian Fred Sanders writes,

A gospel that is only about a moment of conversion but does not extend to every moment of life in Christ is too small. A gospel that gets your sins forgiven but offers no power for transformation is too small. A gospel that isolates one of the benefits of union with Christ and ignores all the others is too small. A gospel that must be measured by your own moral conduct, social conscience, or religious experience is too small. A gospel that rearranges the components of your life but does not put you personally in the presence of God is too small.¹

Let's not be satisfied with a small gospel. Let's consider instead how the good news of Jesus reshapes our lives and transforms us into who God created us to be. This, the third gospel blessing, is called sanctification.

The Bible uses the word "sanctification" in a variety of different ways. One of the best places to discover the topic, Colossians 3:1–17, doesn't use the word at all. It does, however, paint a portrait of sanctification, so before we get to a definition, let's start with a portrait. Think of it as visiting the art gallery before going to the library. Here's what it says:

1 Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, p. 112.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds 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. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Once again, there are more jewels here than time and space to explore. We will limit ourselves to four broad observations.

1. This portrait frames change as putting off (or, in its strongest language, putting to death) and putting on. What is unloving, unholy, un-Jesus should be taken off and

thrown away like clothes too dirty or worn out to wear again. What is good, eternal, loving, and pleasing to God is to be put on like a hot off-the-rack designer outfit.² This putting off and putting on has been described with the denser yet informative language of mortification and vivification.³ Mortification is the putting to death of the old sinful self, and vivification is the awakening to life of the new self united with Jesus. This isn't a one-and-done job; it's a daily, grace-propelled walk with Jesus.

2. The goal of putting off and putting on is the renewal of our new selves “after the image of its Creator” (verse 10).

In other words, this isn't a change project in a vaguely positive direction. It's a renewal project with the goal of making us look more and more like Jesus. It's an identity transformation from who we were in our sin and into who our Father created us to be.

3. This portrait doesn't just show human striving, an I'll do my best and stop doing bad stuff and start doing good stuff.

It's fundamentally a consequence of gospel grace. We have been raised with Christ (verse 1). We don't raise ourselves up to him. God has spiritually united us to Jesus so closely that he sees every believer in Jesus as having died with Jesus on the cross and raised with him from the dead. We are in him. The resurrection life, the new life, isn't just something for the future. It's for right now, and it's a life that we've been brought into by God's grace rather than by our best intentions. This is a crucially important point, and we'll have more to say about it later.

4. It's a portrait of corporate rather than exclusively individualistic renewal.

Yes, we are each unique individuals who have to put off and put on for ourselves, but the context in which this happens is decisively corporate—that is, the church. Much of what you put on is oriented to that community, such as

2 If one wore such designer outfits, which I do not.

3 Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, p. 661.

bearing with and forgiving one another (verse 13). Paul envisions the entire church helping each other along in sanctification through biblical words of encouragement, including corporate worship (verse 16).

With that biblical portrait—putting off and putting on, into the image of Jesus, by grace, and in the church—in mind, let’s arrive at a definition of sanctification. In the Bible the word “sanctification” is related to the words “holy,” “holiness,” and “saint.” We can go one step farther and note that the word “holy” means “set apart.” Sanctification, then, is the work of grace that makes us holy saints, set apart by God for God.

The WSC puts it this way, which you can probably tell uses language from Colossians 3: “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”⁴ Theologians sometimes make a helpful distinction between definitive sanctification and progressive sanctification. Definitive sanctification is a current status and comes before progressive sanctification. As Michael Horton says, “Before we can speak of our being put to holy use and growing in grace, then, we must see that sanctification is first of all God’s act of setting us apart from the world for himself.”⁵ In his grace God has made us holy; he has already set us apart to give us a new identity as saints. Framing it in terms of our total human experience as saints, sufferers, and sinners, counselor Michael Emlet writes,

Ongoing struggle with suffering or our sin must be understood in the basic context of our new identity as children of the living God. We are saints who suffer. We are saints who sin. But we are saints nonetheless at our core.⁶

Progressive sanctification, on the other hand, describes the

4 Westminster Shorter Catechism Question and Answer 35

5 Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 651.

6 Michael Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners*, p. 26.

process of renewal and transformation in which God makes us holy, that is, the putting off and putting on.

And although definitive sanctification and progressive sanctification are two different concepts, we shouldn't separate them either. One follows the other. Both are rooted in our union with Christ and the other gospel treasures of justification and adoption, as Gerald Bray argues:

It is union with Christ that leads to our sanctification, not anything we do or have done that might earn us the accolade of "saint." As with our adoption, sanctification is something given to us at the moment of our conversion that we must develop and apply as we grow into maturity as believers. Perhaps we might say that growth in adoption means understanding more deeply who we are in Christ, whereas growth in sanctification is directed more specifically at how we behave in a spiritually hostile world. But this distinction is more notional than real because in practice it is impossible to do one without the other. Christian growth necessarily affects our appreciation of who we are, and that in turn will determine what we do with our lives.⁷

Sanctification, then, is becoming who we already are.⁸

What's Involved

Now that we've worked through some definitions and terminology, let's consider more what's involved in sanctification. Two questions: Who is doing the work of sanctification? And what does sanctification look like in real-life terms? We've already considered the first question briefly. Colossians 3:1 establishes the basis for our transformation into the image of a holy God as the new resurrection life we have in Jesus. God does that, not us. On the other hand, the directive to put off and put on is something we do. It's real effort, hard-working effort even. So is sanctification something God does by his powerful grace or

7 Bray, *God is Love*, p. 648.

8 See Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 652.

something we do out of sincere faith and obedience? Both! Nowhere else is this seen more clearly than in Philippians 2:12–13. “My beloved,” Paul says, “as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation [i.e., the putting off and putting on of sanctification] with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” We work, and yet God works in us. Even the desire to grow in holiness is a consequence of his transforming work in our hearts.

A former teacher of mine used this illustration. Imagine you’re responsible for clearing the sidewalk of snow at your house (which is the case for homeowners in Chicago like myself). You have two options for how to do the job: a snow shovel or a snowblower. My teacher owned a snow shovel, and a heavy snowfall means strenuous, tiring, and even sweaty labor. A snow blower, on the other hand, has a motor that does all the work for you. All you do is push it along, and voila! The sidewalk gets cleared in perfect, efficient lines. The fact that my teacher had to do all the hard work himself meant that he was much slower to get started than his snow-blowing neighbors and much less enthusiastic about it.

Granted that sanctification is much more complicated and messy than clearing snow, God’s active grace is like a snowblower. He has saved us, freed us, raised us with Christ, and works in our hearts, which makes our work of putting off and putting on possible, even desirable. If grace ended the moment our status changed but didn’t work to transform us, leaving us to do all the work of transformation ourselves, we wouldn’t get very far before facing crushing disappointment or guilt-ridden fear. But if God’s grace isn’t just for the past to justify and adopt me but is a present reality to sanctify me, then obedience becomes like pushing the snowblower rather than heaving the shovel. David Powlison describes it very helpfully: “No one does any of this for you. You are not passive. You are not a puppet or a robot. You are 100 percent responsible, and yet you are 100

percent dependent on outside help.”⁹

So if sanctification is something we do and God does together, what does it look like in real-life terms? David Powlison is worth hearing again, and his short book *How Does Sanctification Work?* is a very helpful, accessible take. Listen to what real-life sanctification looks like:

Becoming more holy does not mean that you become ethereal, ghostly, and detached from the storms of life. It means you are becoming a wiser human being. You are learning how to deal well with your money, your sexuality, your job. You are becoming a better friend and family member. When you talk, your words communicate more good sense, more gravitas, more joy, more reality. You are learning to pray honestly, bringing who God really is to the reality of human need.¹⁰

Notice how different this is from our typical self-transformation projects. Consider our New Year’s resolutions. What do we want to change about ourselves? Our weight. Our social media habits. Chances are the changes we most want to see are for greater productivity, as if we are machines or tools that get tasks done rather than holy image bearers reflecting an infinite God. God doesn’t judge us for how much work we can get done. He’s not an Amazon warehouse manager. Thank God he’s not! So what kind of change does God have in mind? Perhaps the most helpful description of real-life sanctification is a personal one. I make no claim for heroic holiness. I do make a claim for my own saintliness as the Bible understands saintliness. I am a saint. God has set me apart for himself entirely by the grace of Jesus, who died for me. He made me a saint. And because God’s grace hasn’t expired on me, I am a saint who’s being sanctified. The Holy Spirit has made me holy and is making me holy. That means that he’s working in me to put off and put on.

9 Powlison, *How Does Sanctification Work?*, p. 67.

10 Ibid., p. 14.

What do I need to put off? All kinds of stuff; basically everything Paul mentions in Colossians 3:5–8. But I am me in unique ways, and that includes specific patterns and habits of sin and mistakes that describe me more than they describe you. One of the deepest, most long-standing “old man” patterns in my own life has been an inordinate desire to be successful and productive. You can even call this an idol—a false god that I functionally treat as something that makes life not worth living if I don’t have it.

When I was a kid, I fell in love with basketball. I dreamed of becoming an NBA star when I grew up. Reader, I did not become an NBA star. Not even close. I wasn’t even out of high school before my basketball dreams imploded. So what was left? If I couldn’t be a basketball star, could I be a star in something else? For an English class writing assignment, I bemoaned how I wasn’t the best in anything—not in sports, school, anything at all. My basketball idol collapsed, but my need to worship at the idol of achievement was alive and well.

And because I’m a work in progress, that idol is still hanging around. I am constantly tempted to measure my value by how big my church is, what nice compliments I get after my sermons, what a new visitor says about the church service. When those things go well, I’m happy, and all is well with the world. When they don’t go well, I despair. I doubt my calling. I escape into greener grass fantasies where I’m riding high, and my personal worth in my eyes and other people’s eyes is always trending up.

I need to put off that idol every day. I need to mortify it, to put it to death regularly and intentionally. And I need to put something else on. I need to put on Jesus Christ. I need to see how his achievements in his perfect life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection count for me and are the only achievements that will actually matter. I need to hold onto how he delights in me in a way that has nothing to do with the cycle of ministry success and struggle.

And when I put on Christ, the grace of Christ is operating at every moment and from every angle. There's grace—tough, sometimes painful, but real grace—in how he shows me the bankruptcy of my idolatry. There's grace that forgives me when those old patterns seem to win the day. There's grace that meets me with new power the next day. There's grace in his Word, which assures me of his love and guides me in faithful obedience. There's grace in gathering with the church every week to sing together what my heart has forgotten or muddied the previous week. There's grace in the Lord's Supper, which seals the promises of my forgiveness, adoption, and sanctification. There's grace in other people who sincerely love me and pray for me. There's grace in other people who sincerely love me and pray for me. There's grace in ways that I am entirely unaware of yet are dazzlingly effective strategies of the Spirit's work in my life. If you take anything from this story of my life, take this: that God loves me, that my heart often loves other things more than him, but that God is transforming me into who I already am in Jesus. That's my sanctification.

And that's just my story. Yours is different in plot points but the same in theme: a saint being sanctified. Yes, you have to turn from what's wrong in repentance as you turn to Christ in faith every day. Yes, you have to work hard in obedience. But God's grace is working too, and that's why your hard-fought walk with Jesus through all your failings, weaknesses, and sufferings are worth the fight. It's why the gospel is a beautiful treasure.



CONCLUSION

Let's survey where we've been. The gospel, the good news of Jesus, rescues us from our dark past, but it's not just about the past. It promises eternal life in the future, but it's not just about the future. It's a heaping treasure to be enjoyed and lived in right now.

Justification is divine justice that makes us just; infinite forgiveness that forgives what's wrong now. Adoption is fatherly, embracing, unending love. Sanctification is transforming power that reshapes us into who we were always meant to be, which is who we already are in Jesus.

So would you take the promise of the trillion dollars, not knowing when you'll ever get to see it? I wouldn't. I don't even answer the door when solicitors come calling. My skeptical, cynical mind would set off the alarms screaming, "This is a scam! It's not real!" The truth is, though, that I often have those same doubts about the real treasure of the gospel. It's not that I don't believe it's true. It's that I don't always believe it matters. What matters is answering emails, getting kids to soccer practice, finding activities I enjoy and finding time away from work and family so that I can enjoy them.

But then, when I'm left to my thoughts, other doubts start creeping in. Am I a terrible person? Does anyone really know the real me and love me in spite of knowing the real me? Am I doomed to cycles of self-care and self-improvement followed by lapses into the person I'll never escape from?

It's in these doubts, when my life plans and personal accomplishments seem most fragile, when I'm most burdened by my own failings, that another Voice creeps in. A Voice announcing good news, news so good it's actually a priceless treasure. And when I stop, listen, and believe it, then those treasures start to become real to me. And the more I trust that Voice, and the more I follow after it, the deeper I discover those treasures go.

Holy Trinity Church North Side
2318 W Roscoe St. Chicago, IL 60618
htcnorthside.org