

THE SONS OF GOD AMONG MEN

by Ray C. Stedman

The song *Thank You, Lord*, by Dan Burgess, says:

It goes against the grain
To put my human nature down
And let the Spirit take control.

That is a very honest reflection of the struggle that we all feel when we are under severe temptation.

We want to do what is right, but we also want to do what is wrong; so the battle is on! The way that you win at times like that is to remember who you are. In the epistle to the Romans, especially in Chapters 7 and 8, we learn that God's way of releasing us in times of pressure is to remind us of who we really are before him. We have learned that we are no longer in Adam if we believe in Jesus Christ; we are in Christ, we are tied to him, we belong to him.

The first half of Romans 8 teaches us that if we are in Christ, we are also in the Spirit. That helps us to understand something that is confusing to many people today. The Spirit and the Lord Jesus belong together; it is the work of the Spirit to make Jesus real. So, to be in Christ means to be in the Spirit. Romans 8:5-13 tells us that if we are in the Spirit, we have the possibility of walking according to the Spirit, and thus we have power to overcome the sin that is within. Now, that is a very important matter, and one that we ought to understand clearly. Because we do not always feel that we have power to overcome sin, we need to recognize that certain facts are true, whether we feel it or not. The fact is that, because we are in Christ, and in the Spirit, we have the power to walk according to the Spirit -- if we choose to. As Paul says in Galatians 5:25, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit," {Gal 5:25 KJV}. That is the way to victory.

What we really are saying is that behavior depends on seeing and recognizing who you are and the basic facts about your identity. Psychologists tell us this. They say that only when you have a clear idea of who you really are can you then act that way. But you can't turn the two around. You can't act like something you would like to be, and thus gradually become that kind of person. That is what confuses so many people today. Millions of people today are operating on the basis that they will become the kind of person they would like to be if they act that way. But that is wrong. The Word of God tells us the truth -- the way to become different is to become changed at the very basis of your being by faith in Christ, so that you are something different. And if you believe what you are, you will begin to act that way. What a difference that makes!

In the second half of Romans 8, Paul gives us a further revelation of what being in Christ and in the Spirit actually means. The apostle has been leading us step by step to understand more fully our new identity in Jesus Christ. The more we understand that identity, and the more we believe it to be true, under all circumstances, the more quickly we will begin to act that way.

In Verses 14-15, Paul uses a term he has never used before in this letter. He says,

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit who makes you sons. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." {Rom 8:14-15 NIV}

For the first time in this letter Paul uses the phrase "the sons of God." Now, I want to make something clear. This is a generic term that includes both sexes. There is no necessity now of referring to a female person as something different than the male. All believers in Christ who really trust him and have received the gift of righteousness by faith are sons of God -- regardless of whether they are male or female. There is no need for any differentiation of the sexes here. That is why the Scriptures speak of us -- all of us -- freely as the "sons of

the living God," {Hos 1:10, Rom 9:26}. You see, this speaks of something that is true of our spirit, and our spirit is sexless. Spirit is not identifiable by male or female, so what is true of the human spirit is quite apart from what is true of the body.

It is important in understanding this to recognize right off that not everybody is a son of God. According to Galatians 5, you are sons of God by faith in Jesus Christ. That is what makes you a son of God, nothing else. It is true that we are all creatures of God by natural birth. When Paul was preaching in Athens, that great intellectual center, he mentioned to the Athenians that even their own poets recognized that men came from God. We are the offspring of God, and in him "we live and move and have our being" {Acts 17:28}, he said. That is true of all human beings everywhere in the world at all times. We are creatures of God. We are the offspring of God.

But Paul is careful to use quite a different word in Romans. Here the word is "sons of God." We are in the family of God, and this is a very distinctive term. I want to underscore how important this is for us to understand, because it is something that God intends for us to return to when we are in trouble. If you are having difficulty handling your behavior -- whether you are not doing what you want to do, or doing what you don't want to do -- the way to handle it is to remind yourself of what God has made you to be. This terminology is tremendously helpful.

In other words, in the struggle that you have with sin within you, you are not a slave, helplessly struggling against a cruel and powerful master; you are a son, a son of the living God, with power to overcome the evil -- even though it is a struggle to do so. And though you may be temporarily overcome, you are never ultimately defeated. It cannot be, because you are already constituted children of God. That is why Paul could say in Romans 6, "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace," {Rom 6:14 KJV}. And in this gracious relationship, we are made and constituted sons of the living God. No matter what happens to us, that is what we are. Nothing can change that. That is the place from which we start.

It is important also for us to see how we become sons of God. Paul says, "You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear." When the Spirit of God came into your heart, he did not make you a slave to fear. Remember how Paul puts that again in Second Timothy 1:7: "You have not received a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind," {cf, 2 Tim 1:7 KJV}. That is the nature of the Holy Spirit. What did the Spirit do? Paul says, "You received the Spirit who makes you sons," or, literally, "the Spirit of adoption, who adopted you as sons." How did you become a son of God? Well, the Spirit of God found you, and found me, and he adopted us into God's family.

I was with a family the other night where there were two adopted children and two natural-born children. I watched all evening long to see if I could tell which were the adopted ones and which were the natural ones. I finally had to ask the parents because I couldn't tell any difference -- even with their looks. Two were adopted into the family and two were natural-born children, but they were all treated so beautifully and so naturally that I couldn't tell the difference.

Some of you may be saying at this point, "Look, you are confusing me. What do you mean when you say we are adopted into the family of God? I have been taught from the Scriptures that I was born into the family of God. I have been born again." That is the term that is being bandied about these days. Even politicians are boasting, "I've been born again!" Thank God, some of them are. "But," you say, "some passages talk about the new birth, about being born into the family of God. I thought we were born, not adopted. What do you mean by adopted?"

I am glad you asked that question. You see, the truth is that both of these are true. You are both adopted and born into the family of God. As Jesus said on another occasion, "With man that is impossible, but with God, all things are possible," {Matt 19:26}. You can't be both adopted and born into a human family, but you can in God's family. God uses both of these terms because he wants to highlight two different aspects of our belonging to the family of God. You are said to be adopted because God wants you to remember always that you are not naturally part of the family of God. We have been seeing all along in this letter that we are born into Adam's family, and we are all children of Adam by natural birth. We belong to the human family, and we inherit Adam's nature. All his defects, all his problems, all the evil that came into his life by his acts of

disobedience -- all these were passed along to us by natural birth. So by nature we are not part of God's family. This is just like some of you, who were born into one family, and, then, by a legal process, were taken out of that family and were adopted into another family. From then on you became part of the family that adopted you.

This is what has happened to us. God has taken us out of our natural state in Adam, and, by the process of the Spirit, has made us legally sons of God, and we are part of his family. But he reminds us that we are in his family by adoption so that we might never take it for granted, or forget that if we were left in our natural state we would not have a part in the family of God. It is only by the grace of God that we come into his family.

But it is also true that we are born into God's family. Once we have been adopted, it is also true that, because God is God, he not only makes us legally his sons but he makes us actually partake of the divine nature and we are born into his family. We actually share the nature of God! It is an amazing statement! This tie with Jesus is so real that we are seen to be actually one with him, and we share the divine nature. Peter puts it this way: "We have been made partakers of the divine nature," {cf, 2 Pet 1:4 KJV}. So we are as much a part of God's family as if we had originally been born into it, and we are born into it by the grace of God.

So both of these statements are true. There is nothing more wonderful to remind yourself of, morning by morning, and day by day, than this great fact: If you are a Christian, you are a son of the living God, adopted and born into his family. Because you are his son, God loves you, God protects you, God provides for you, God plans for you, God hears you, God claims you and openly acknowledges you, God chastens and corrects you, and God honors you. All of that is true because you are his son.

We know how we treat our natural children. There is a difference between them and the neighbors' children. Our children are considerably superior, of course. We may love the neighbors' children, they may be delightful children. We have some wonderful children in our neighborhood whom we love and admire, but they are not our children. We have a special relationship with our children. We care for them, we hurt for them, we love and protect them, we plan for them, we watch out for them. We are specially tied with them. That is what this is saying to us. God has a special relationship to us. We are the sons of God turned loose among the sons of men.

It would be helpful, I know, if God would put a little mark on us that would indicate that we are his sons. If we had a little red star on our foreheads, then we could tell all the other sons of God. Or perhaps if we had a special glow. (Sometimes that does show, anyway.) But there is no special mark. Outwardly, there is no distinction; but inwardly, there is a tremendous distinction, and that is what we need to understand. We can't tell by looking at anyone whether he is a son of God or not, though often there is an underlying sense that reveals itself and identifies brothers and sisters in Christ. But there is a vast difference within, and because of that difference, there is a special relationship that God has with us.

Now, the great question in all this is: "If this all depends on my being a son of God, how can I be sure that I am a son?" Paul has been leading up to this question all through this letter. If the thing that is going to make the essential difference in your life (not only now, in the way you behave, but for eternity, in the destiny you are headed for) is whether or not you are a son of God, then the greatest question in life is, "Am I or am I not a son of God?"

You can't ask for a more important question than that to settle. Your whole behavior, your happiness as an individual, your ultimate destiny, your whole relationship to the greatness and the glory of God, is all dependent on that question: Are you or are you not a son of God? That is why the Apostle Paul in this passage gives us three very practical tests -- three levels of assurance -- by which we can know whether we are sons or not.

First, Paul says, if you are led by the Spirit of God, you are a son of God. Now, to be led by the Spirit means that you are under the control of a being other than yourself. This, therefore, is a level of proof which arises from our circumstances, from our experiences, from the events and reactions that happen to us, over which we have no deliberate control. Paul is saying that we can learn the answer to this question by observation. This is proof addressed to the mind. You can reason it; you can observe it. You can look around in your life and see if

you are being led by the Spirit of God. If there is proof that you are, then you are a son of God.

What are some of these signs? There are certain things that the Scriptures tell us the Spirit of God is going to do when he comes into a life. If he has done them, and you can see that he has, you have immediate assurance that you are a son of God. "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God." So let's look at the signs of being led by the Spirit.

I think the most evident sign, at least one of the most important to me and obviously something that doesn't come from man, is that when I read the Scriptures I am taught by the Spirit. He opens our minds to an understanding of the Word of God. He is called the Spirit of truth. Therefore, when he comes into our lives, the first thing he will do is to make the Bible a living Word to us. We see it as truth -- we know it as truth. Our eyes are opened to understand that here at last is reality. This is the work of the Spirit of God.

Have you ever been reading a passage of Scripture when suddenly something just leaped out at you? The passage takes on a new and fresh and glowing meaning. If that has happened, you are being led by the Spirit of God. He is doing his work of opening the truth to your minds and hearts. This, of course, is what Paul refers to in Verse 13: "If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live," {Rom 8:13 NIV}. He is talking about our understanding of what the Spirit of God has already done with the flesh within us, how it was crucified with Christ, and how, therefore, we can be freed from it. We can rise up and refuse to obey that flesh because its connection with us has been broken. If you understand that, you are being led by the Spirit of God, and, therefore, you are a son of God.

Some years ago when I was in a city some distance from here, I was rather discouraged, and I opened the Scriptures and read one of Paul's letters. I was so impressed with a statement that he made about Christians. He said, "Remember that you are chosen of God, and precious in his sight," {cf, 1 Pet 2:4}. It came home to me suddenly that this applied to me. I was chosen of God, and precious in his sight! That kind of an experience is something done by the Spirit of God within us, teaching us the truth.

The Spirit also arouses us to pray. Have you ever felt that you just had to pray, that you just had to get away somewhere and have a few moments of quiet? You may not have prayed for several days, but suddenly you can't stand it any longer. You have got to find some time when you can open up and talk to your Father. Now, that is being led of the Spirit of God. It is he who arouses in us the desire to pray. And those who have had these experiences can know by them that they are children of God.

Another thing the Spirit does is awaken a love for the brethren. When you meet somebody and learn they are a Christian do you ever feel a special bond with them right off? Have you ever longed to be with Christians? Sometimes do you get tired of even the closest of friends who are not Christians and long to be with those who are? Do you long to be with brothers and sisters in the family? That is what makes the Body Life service here on Sunday night such a beautiful time, and what brings people in week after week, year after year. The Spirit awakens within us a love for the brethren. John says in his first letter that if you have a love for the brethren it is a sign that you are in Christ {cf, 1 Jn 3:14}.

Another sign is that the Spirit makes the world empty, and makes God real. The Spirit directs us and checks us at times. Do you ever feel this? These are signs that we are being led by the Spirit of God.

Of course, ultimately, the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit in us {cf, Gal 5:22-23}. If we have evidence at all that we are truly loving -- especially when it is hard to be loving -- if we feel love and joy and peace and gentleness and compassion and goodness and faith, then we know these have all been awakened by the Spirit of God. "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God," {Rom 8:14 KJV}. That is one test by which we can know if we are sons of God.

There is another level of assurance of our sonship mentioned in the closing part of Verse 15: "And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" Abba is the Aramaic word for father. Of course, the Greek word is translated "father" here, also. So, by means of the Spirit, we are given an emotional response to God in which we are aware of his fatherhood, and our soul cries out within us, "Abba, Father." Abba is a baby's word.

I remember years ago hearing this story about Dr. Alan McRae, a great Bible student and Hebrew scholar. Some time after the McRae's baby boy was born, Dr. McRae had to go away for three or four weeks. When he came back, this wife was showing him how the baby had learned to say a few words. When Dr. McRae, this eminent Hebrew scholar, came in, his little son stretched out his arms and said, "Ab-Abba, abba!" Dr. McRae said, "Look, he's speaking Aramaic already!" The closest and most intimate relationship you can have is the awareness that you belong to a father, with a father's arms around you, a father's heart concerned for you, a father's wisdom planning for you, and a father's love protecting and guarding you. If you have ever sensed the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of Jesus, it is because the Spirit of God has awakened your heart to sense that you belong to the family of God.

I have seen this happen with people in a congregation like this. I have seen tears come to their eyes when something from the Scriptures reminds them of their relationship to God the Father. It can happen when you are driving your car, or sitting with your family, or going through a time of sorrow. Suddenly and unexpectedly, that wonderful sense that you belong to the Father comes, and you cherish that relationship, and your soul cries, "Abba, my Father!" This, by the way, is the word Jesus himself used in the agony of Gethsemane. As he knelt to pray in his hour of anguish, he cried out, "Oh Abba -- my Father!" {Mark 14:36 NIV}. Even in his anguish he was aware of that relationship.

Verse 16 tells us of still another level of assurance that the Spirit is in us:

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. {Rom 8:16 NIV}

This is the deepest level of assurance. Beyond the emotions, beyond the feelings, is a deep conviction that is born of the Spirit of God himself, an underlying awareness that we cannot deny that we are part of God's family. We are the children of God. I think this is the basic revelation to which our emotions respond with the cry, "Abba, Father." That is our love to him, but this is his love to us. It is what Paul refers to in Romans 5 when he speaks of the love of God "which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit which is given unto us," {cf, Rom 5:5 KJV}.

As I look back on my own life, I can understand how this is true. I think I became a Christian when I was about eleven years old, in a Methodist brush arbor meeting. I responded to the invitation, and, with others, came and knelt down in front and received the Lord. I had a wonderful time of fellowship with the Lord that summer and the next winter, and there were occasions when I just would be overwhelmed with the sense of the nearness and dearness of God. I used to sing hymns until tears would come to my eyes as the meaning of those old words reflected on the relationship that I had with God. Then I used to preach to the cows when I would bring them home. Those cows were a very good audience too; by the way; they never went to sleep on me.

But that fall we moved from this town where I had Christian fellowship to a town in Montana that didn't even have a church. Gradually, because of that lack of fellowship, I drifted away from that relationship with God, drifted into all kinds of ugly and shameful things -- habits of thought and activity that I am ashamed of. I even developed some liberal attitudes toward the Scriptures. I didn't believe in the inspiration of the Bible. I argued against it, and during high school and college I was known as a skeptic.

But all through those seven years there was a relationship with God I could not deny. Somehow I knew, deep down inside, that I still belonged to him; and there were things I could not do, even though I was tempted. I could not do them because I felt that I had a tie with God. This is that witness of the Spirit. Calvin called it "the testimonial of the Spirit," which we cannot deny and which is especially discernible in times of gross sin and despair. First John 3:20 says, "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart," {1 Jn 3:20a KJV}. He knows all things. There is a witness born of the Spirit which you can't shake, which is there along with the ultimate testimony that we belong with the children of God.

Now, this is where to begin when you get into trouble. Go back to this relationship. Remind yourself of who you are. You can see it in your experience as you look around. You are led by the Spirit of God. You can feel it in your heart. There are times when your emotions are stirred by the Spirit, and you can sense at the level of your spirit that you belong to God.

In Verse 17, the apostle goes on to mention an even greater and deeper relationship. I am not going to take time on this verse because it introduces the next section in the passage, but I just want to read Verse 17:

Now if we are children, then we are heirs -- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. {Rom 8:17 NIV}

These words introduce the very climax of this epistle. We learn of the glory that is awaiting us and its tie with the sufferings that we go through now. I just bring this in here to show how the apostle has led us along:

- We started in Adam;
- We are now, by faith, in Christ;
- If we are in Christ, we are in the Spirit;
- If we are in the Spirit, we can walk according to the Spirit;
- If we are in the Spirit, we are therefore led by the Spirit; and
- If we are led by the Spirit, we are the sons of God; and
- If we are the sons of God, we are heirs of God.

All that God owns is to be committed to us.

That is a staggering, mind-blowing thing, but that is what the apostle writes, and it runs all the way through the Scriptures. There is a thread that runs all the way from Genesis right through Revelation. In subtle and sometimes open ways it is constantly hinting that something fantastic is coming. What God has in mind for this beguiled and driven race of men who are now redeemed by faith in Christ is beyond description! That is what Paul is going to bring before us now, as we consider the heritage that is waiting for us in Jesus Christ.

But all this is for us to remember when we get into trouble. This is not just hope for the future; it is deliverance for the present. If we remember who we are, by an absolute psychological certainty, we will start acting like who we are. When we do, we will find that there is power available to say "No" to the flesh, to say "Yes" to the Spirit, and to walk in a way that glorifies God.

Prayer

Our Father, we ask you to help us to understand these things. We thank you for the work of the Spirit. We are not often conscious of his working, except as these things are pointed out to us in the Scriptures and we see them and recognize them to be true. But we thank you, Lord, for the working of the Spirit of God. O mighty Spirit! What a wonderful thing it is that you have called us to be children of the living God. Help us never to forget it, and to walk worthy of such a calling. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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