

## “Adopted Children of God”

July 26, 2015

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*Galatians 4:1–7 (ESV)*

<sup>1</sup> *I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, <sup>2</sup> but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. <sup>3</sup> In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. <sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. <sup>6</sup> And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.<sup>1</sup>*

We have a father problem. Actually, we have a fatherless problem. According to the 2010 U. S. Census, one out of three children—24 million in all—lived in homes where their biological father was absent.<sup>2</sup> Only 46 percent of children live in homes with two heterosexual married parents in their first marriage. In 1960, that percentage was 73. In 1980, it was 61 percent.<sup>3</sup> With each decade, there is a steady decline in two-parent homes, and a steady increase in homes where fathers are absent.

Why is this a problem? Children raised in fatherless homes are four times more likely to live in poverty. 90 percent of all runaway and homeless children are fatherless. Fatherless children are ten times more likely to have substance abuse problems and 71 percent of teenagers who have substance abuse problems come from fatherless homes. Fatherless children are two times more likely to commit suicide. 80 percent of adolescents in psychiatric hospitals come from fatherless homes. Children raised in fatherless homes are nine times more likely to drop out of school. Children raised in fatherless homes are eleven times more likely to have violent behavior and twenty times more likely to be incarcerated. 70 percent of teenagers in juvenile correctional facilities come from fatherless homes. 60 percent of rapists come from fatherless homes. Children being raised in fatherless homes are nine times more likely to be raped or

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> National Fatherhood Initiative, “Statistics on the Father Absence Crisis in America,” <http://www.fatherhood.org/father-absence-statistics>, accessed July 25, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, “Less Than Half of U.S. Kids Today Live in a ‘Traditional’ Family,” December 22, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/>.

sexually abused. 70 percent of all teenage pregnancies occur in fatherless homes.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, we have a fatherless problem.

Even in homes where the father is present, he is often absent, spending a lot of time at work. Many fathers are emotionally detached and not engaged in the lives of their children. The results are disastrous.

So, we see from these statistics that we have a father problem. I think this shows that when we go against God's design for marriage and the family, we see bad fruit. But it also points to a greater problem. The Bible teaches that not one of us is born a child of God. And what we see in the Bible rubs people the wrong way. That's because it's common for people to think that all of us are children of God. But that's simply not true. As far as I know, there are only two passages in the Bible that could even hint that all humans are children of God. The first is Luke 3:38. This is at the end of Luke's genealogy of Jesus. Luke gives Jesus' genealogy in reverse chronological order, so he starts with Jesus and works his way all the way back to Adam, whom he calls "the son of God." Adam was intended to be God's son, in the sense that he was supposed to be in a faithful relationship with God. He was supposed to interact with God the way a son should. But Adam didn't do that.

The other passage is in Acts 17, when Paul is preaching in Athens. In Athens, Paul is trying to explain who Jesus is and what he had done, and he's trying to explain this in ways that the men in Athens could understand. So he quotes a couple of their poets. In verse 28, Paul quotes a poem by a man named Aratus, who was, like Paul, from the city of Cilicia. The bit of the poem we have in our Bibles says, "For we are indeed his offspring." The original poem, though, was not about the God of the Bible. It was about Zeus. The original poem was quite pantheistic. It came out of a worldview that believes that God is in everything, and everything is God. It says, "All the ways are full of Zeus. . . . The sea is full of him; so are the harbors. In every way we have all to do with Zeus, for we are truly his offspring."<sup>5</sup> Paul wasn't endorsing this whole line of thought. What he was trying to do was to show that we are all made by God. We can all trace our roots back to Adam (v. 26). He was trying to show that we are made in

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<sup>4</sup> National Center for Fathering, "Fatherless Epidemic," <http://fathers.com/wp39/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/fatherlessInfographic.png>, accessed July 25, 2015. This infographic indicates the resources from which these figures were taken.

<sup>5</sup> Aratus, *Phainomena*, quoted in F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 339.

God's image, not the other way around. So, in some broad sense, we are God's children because he made us.

But in a more meaningful sense, we're not born God's children because we are not born having a relationship with God. To put it another way, we're not born in a right relationship with God.

To see this, we need to consider something that Paul wrote in another one of his letters, Ephesians. At the beginning of chapter 2, Paul writes,

<sup>1</sup> And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Paul is telling the Ephesians—and by extension, us—that all of us used to be spiritually dead. We used to follow Satan, the “prince of the power of the air.” We used to be “sons of disobedience.” And we used to be “children of wrath.” That's who we are by our original nature. The New International Version blunts the force of that phrase by translating it “by nature objects of wrath.” Their recent revision changes it to “by nature deserving of wrath.” But it literally says “children of wrath.” Paul's point is that we start out not as God's children, but as people who deserve condemnation. Why? Because Adam, the first man, sinned. In Romans 5, Paul says that the sin of one man led to condemnation for all men (v. 18). That may not seem fair, but that's how life begins for us.

I don't think sin and a sinful nature are genetic, in the sense that we could find a “sin gene” in our DNA. But we do have a sinful nature from the beginning. You may not like it, but you may not like other things that you inherit from your ancestors, either.

This situation is so bad that later in Ephesians 2, Paul says that before Gentiles became Christians, they were “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). Before we came to Christ, we were children of wrath, without hope and without God. And that's true of all non-Christians right now—they are without hope and without God.

Another apostle, John, takes this idea even further. This is what John writes in 1 John 3:4-10:

<sup>4</sup> Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> You know that he [Jesus] appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup> No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. <sup>7</sup> Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup> Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. <sup>10</sup> By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

John says that no one who makes a practice of sinning is a child of God. He doesn't mean that God's children never sin. We know that not just from experience, but also because earlier in this letter, John writes, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Children of God still struggle with sin, but their lives aren't marked by repeated sin. But John says that whoever makes a practice of sinning is "of the devil" (v. 8). Then he says, again, "By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother" (v. 10).

That sounds a bit extreme. But this is God's Word, and it is true. There are two types of people: children of God, and children of the devil. Even Jesus himself says basically the same thing. In John 8 he was debating with some Jewish religious leaders. They thought that because they were Jewish, they were children of Abraham and children of God. But Jesus said no. This is what it says in John 8:42-44:

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. <sup>43</sup> Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. <sup>44</sup> You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. <sup>45</sup> But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. <sup>46</sup> Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? <sup>47</sup> Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

Jesus' point is that those who lack faith and who reject the truth do so because they are acting like Satan. In a sense, they are under his power. They are his children. But those who are

born of God believe in the truth and they act like their Father. We all start out as children of the devil. Russell Moore says, “Our birth father has fangs. And left to ourselves, we’ll show ourselves to be as serpentine as he is.”<sup>6</sup> But Paul tell us that those who come to Jesus in faith become God’s children. They are adopted as his sons, which means they receive the full inheritance of God.

I took time to explain this concept because it’s so important to what we see in Galatians 4:-17. If we don’t understand all of what the Bible says about children and their father, we won’t understand how amazing it is that God adopts some people to be his own children. So let’s now look at the first two verses:

<sup>1</sup> I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, <sup>2</sup> but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

Here, Paul is talking about history. Before Christ came, people were like children who hadn’t received their inheritance yet. In Roman law, a male child would receive the inheritance, and before he was 14 years old, he was under the care of a guardian. The guardian would have been named in his father’s will. After that, until age 25, the heir would have been under the supervision of a curator, who was appointed by the state. After that, he received his full inheritance. So Paul is making a similar point to what we saw last week, in Galatians 3:23-24, when he said that the law served as a guardian for people before Jesus came. Here Paul adapts this to make an illustration: before the time of receiving the inheritance, Christians were no better than slaves.

Paul then says how we were enslaved in the third verse: “In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.” What does that mean? What are the “elementary principles of the world”? There is some debate about what that means, but it seems the best answer is that the elementary principles refer to such things as air, earth, fire, and water, as well as other elements of the universe. This was what this phrase usually meant in Paul’s day. So what does Paul mean by saying we were enslaved to such things?

Paul could mean that the Israelites were obsessed with physical things such as circumcision and food laws. That fits with what we see in the whole letter of Galatians. But Paul

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<sup>6</sup> Russell D. Moore, *Adopted for Life: The Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 29.

probably means something more than that. In that time, these elements were often associated with false gods. For example, some people worshiped some form of a sun god. And there were many other false gods that were associated with parts of creation. We see this in a book called the Wisdom of Solomon. This is not the Word of God, but it does appear in the Catholic Bible. We would consider it part of the Apocrypha, the books that were written and used by Jewish people after the time of the Old Testament and before the New Testament was written. This is what the Wisdom of Solomon says:

<sup>1</sup> For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists, nor did they recognize the artisan while paying heed to his works; <sup>2</sup> but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. <sup>3</sup> If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. <sup>4</sup> And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them. <sup>5</sup> For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator (Wisdom of Solomon 13:1-5).

The beginning of that sounds a bit like Romans 1, where Paul says people worshiped created things instead of the Creator. But notice what the author says: these people, who don't know the true God, suppose fire or wind or stars are gods who rule the world. If Paul has this idea in mind, he means that we were enslaved to idols. Jewish people who tried to obey the law in order to earn God's favor, not out of faith, made their moral performance their god. Gentiles who didn't have the Old Testament law, worshiped something else. It could have been a sun god, or they could have put their ultimate trust in money or almost anything else. Anything that we treasure most can be our idol. An idol is often something that is a good gift from God that we turn into something ultimate. If we don't get it, we're miserable. If we lost it, we would feel like our lives are over. We think we're free when we have it, but we're not. When Peter was talking about false teachers who were promoting sexual sin, he wrote, "They [the false teachers] promise them [the people they were teaching] freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved" (2 Pet. 2:19). People don't like to think of themselves as slaves, but that's what we are. There's always something or someone that controls us.

But that's not the end of the story. Paul then tells us some good news in verses 4 and 5:

<sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

When the time was right, God sent his Son, Jesus, into the world. The time was right because it was the time the Father ordained before he created the universe. Why did Jesus come into the world over two thousand years ago and not earlier or later? We don't really know. The point is that at the right time, the Son of God entered into human history as a man. He was born of a woman, which means he was a real man.<sup>7</sup> And Jesus was born under the law, which meant that he was born a Jewish man, who was bound to obey the law. We know from elsewhere in the Bible that Jesus obeyed perfectly.<sup>8</sup>

It's interesting that in the book of Job, two times a question is posed with the phrase "born of (a) woman." The first is asked by Eliphaz, one of Job's friends: "What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?" (Job 15:14). Later, another one of Job's friends, Bildad, asks, "How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure?" (Job 25:4). The answer is that a normal man can't be righteous and pure. But Jesus, the God-man, was perfect. Only he is righteous. And we can be in the right before God by putting our trust in Jesus. We are made righteous because we are united to Jesus and are credited with his moral perfection, while he paid for our sins when he died on the cross.

He was made to come under the law so that we could be brought out of the law. He came so that we could be redeemed. That's a term used for the manumission of slaves. When a slave was purchased and set free, he was redeemed. That's what Jesus did. He set us free from slavery. Douglas Moo, whose commentary on Galatians I've been reading, said, "Christ becomes a slave to the law so that those who are enslaved under that law might be set free."<sup>9</sup>

Doug Moo also said something else I found striking: "Christ, the Son, becomes human so that humans can become sons."<sup>10</sup> Jesus gives us something else: adoptions. Christians are

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<sup>7</sup> See Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4; Matt 11:11 for use of this phrase with reference to ordinary humans. This is not a reference to Jesus' virginal conception and birth.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 267.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

adopted as sons. Paul didn't make a mistake in writing "sons." He means that both Christian men and women receive the full inheritance that God gives his children: forgiveness of sins, eternal life in a perfect world, and the Holy Spirit. Think back to what I said earlier: we are not born children of God. In fact, the Bible says we are sons of the devil. But God adopts us as his sons. How can he do such a thing? Because if you are a Christian, you are united to the true Son, Jesus. You are regarded as having his status. Russell Moore writes, "When we were still orphans, Christ became a substitute orphan for us."<sup>11</sup> He left his home in heaven so he could come to rescue us. He was adopted by an earthly father, Joseph, so that we could be adopted by our heavenly Father.

When we are adopted as God's children, we are brought into his family. But we're also given a new identity. And this includes salvation, of course. Adoption means that God chose us to enter into his family. After all, adopted kids don't choose their parents. But adopting parents choose whom they will adopt. That's what Paul writes in Ephesians 1:

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup> even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, <sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Think back to what I said at the very beginning of this sermon. There are so many children who grow up without fathers. And many kids who have their fathers around have unloving fathers. There may be some of us here today who didn't have a father around, or who didn't have good fathers. But if you are a Christian, you have the best Father possible. If your biological father didn't make you feel wanted, please know that your Father in heaven chose you and he loves you.

Let's now look at the last two verses of this passage, verses 6 and 7:

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<sup>11</sup> Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 45.



<sup>6</sup> And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Paul says that God’s “sons”—which again, includes men and women—receive the Holy Spirit. He doesn’t mean that first you become a child of God, and then you receive the Spirit, because in other passages, Paul seems to indicate that the Spirit comes at the same time as faith. He means that receiving the Holy Spirit is proof that we’re children of God.<sup>12</sup> That’s what we see in a similar passage in Romans 8:

<sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. <sup>15</sup> 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!” <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> 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 (Rom. 8:14-17).

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity and he is the indwelling presence of God. His presence in our lives proves that we are children of God and will never be separated from him. He helps us to obey God. Notice that Paul says God sent the Spirit of the Son—all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned.

The Spirit cries “Abba! Father!” I think Paul means the Spirit cries this out through us—the Spirit causes us to cry out to God. What is “Abba”? It’s an Aramaic word for “father.” Remember, Paul is writing this letter in Greek. Aramaic is the language that Jesus and his disciples spoke in Palestine. This was not the language that the Galatians spoke. So why does Paul write this word?

On the night that Jesus was betrayed and arrested, the night before he died, he went to the garden of Gethsemane and prayed. In Mark’s Gospel, we read this:

<sup>35</sup> And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. <sup>36</sup> And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:35-36).

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner (*Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010], 272): “He is not intending to say that the Spirit being given *after* sonship is a reality. The point is that the Spirit *confirms, authenticates, and ratifies* their sonship”

Sometimes, pastors will say that “Abba” means “Daddy.” In a sense, it does. But Paul doesn’t use this word for sentimental purposes. He wants us to recall Jesus crying out to the Father in anguish. Jesus cried out to the Father in this way and endured the agony of the cross so that we could be children of God.

But there’s something else to this. I’ve quoted Russell Moore a couple of times. He’s a Baptist theologian who wrote a very good book on adoption called *Adopted for Life*. He says that this cry of “Abba” “is primal scream theology.”<sup>13</sup> He means that the Spirit causes us to cry out to God, our Father, when we realize that things in this world are not the way that they should be. This is what he writes:

The Spirit leads us to see when we are in enemy-occupied territory, and he teaches us to rage against that machine. We’re frustrated now when we see images of a python swallowing a pig on a nature program on television, when we see a billboard for a divorce attorney, when we hear of children swept away by a mudslide in the Third World, when we find ourselves gossiping about an acquaintance. The Spirit leads us to cry out with the rest of the universe, “O God, deliver us from this! This is not how it’s supposed to be!”<sup>14</sup>

We go to our Father and cry out to him because we need him, because we’re like children who are upset. We look around at the mess we’re in and cry out, “Daddy, fix it!” I already read a passage from Romans 8 that says we have received the Spirit of adoption. That same passage talks about suffering. Then, a few verses later, it says the whole creation has been groaning because it has been “subjected to futility” because of sin in the world. The whole universe is groaning because things aren’t the way that they should be (see vv. 19-22). Then Paul says, “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” (Rom. 8:23). We look forward to the day when we will receive our inheritance in full, when we will live in a new world with perfect bodies in the presence of God.

Before I finish, I want us to think about what this passage means for us. If you are a Christian here today, thank God for adopting you. Consider what that means. God chose you and loves you. He decided to bring you into his family. He did that at great cost. He redeemed you through his Son, who died for you.

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<sup>13</sup> Moore, *Adopted for Life*, 51.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

If you're not a Christian today, consider what this means. We live in a universe that is orphaned and enslaved. There is a way to enter into a perfect family of love. There is a way to inherit the whole world. But it doesn't come through our own efforts. It doesn't come through striving to earn someone's approval, or to have the most money, or to be the best at work. It comes through putting your trust in God. It comes through realizing the only way out of slavery is Jesus.

I think we should also should consider what it means for us as individuals and as a church to be adopted by God. Throughout the Bible, God says that he cares for orphans and widows. Psalm 68:5 says, "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation." Hosea 14:3 says to God: "In you the orphan finds mercy." Throughout the Bible, there are stories of adoption: Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter (Exod. 2:1-10). In a sense, Ruth was adopted by her mother-in-law Naomi (Ruth 1:1-18). King David "showed the kindness of God" to Mephibosheth, the son of David's friend Jonathan, who was the son of Saul. Mephibosheth was crippled and David took him into his family. He ate at the king's table (2 Samuel 9). Jesus himself was raised by a man, Joseph, who was not his biological father. It seems that God is a God of adoption, and his people are people of adoption.

That means that we should consider ways that we can be people of adoption. Some of you know that Kathy and I began a process of adoption a few years ago. We felt called to adopt a child internationally, and we started the process of adopting a child from Ethiopia. That was three years ago. Because of political and bureaucratic issues in Ethiopia, the wait time is rather long. Perhaps you can pray that God would speed up the process or give us wisdom as to how to proceed.

We can also be people who support children through organizations like World Vision or Compassion International. We can help support single mothers who are struggling because of a lack of a father in their home. We can help mentor children through organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters. I have done that twice and those experiences were some of the most important ones in my life.

We can also be people of adoption just by taking other people into our lives. There are many people who are hurting and lonely and lost. Look around for these people. Invite them into your life. Be a friend to them. And tell them about how to be adopted by God.