

Abba, Father!

Second Series – Sermon Nineteen

Original by George MacDonald

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This sermon is the thesis of the three series of the "Unspoken Sermons." I think it is fair to say that MacDonald's primary passion was revealing and restoring the Father's heart to His children. Our refusal to acknowledge God as our Father is the primary difficulty of the whole of human affairs. This stubborn independence underlies all most every anxiety and difficulty in life. God is the Creator of everything good and is about the business of drawing His children to Himself and making them good like Himself! We were created in the "image and likeness" of the Divine, and our destiny is to become what we are!



Abba is the most intimate of terms used by children with their fathers, like Papa. The whole Universe is the nursery for His children. Beyond its own will or understanding, the entire creation works for the maturing of God's children into the sons of God. When at last, we have risen and gone to our Father. When we are clothed, with a ring on our finger and shoes on our feet. When we are finally shining out in our predestined sonship, then creation will break out into singing, and the trees and fields will clap their hands. The most beautiful and challenging thing in the world is to cry *Abba Father* from a full heart! And MacDonald was devoted to helping us make this cry to our common Father!

Outline

Adoption? – When a child hears it must be adopted, its love is chilled!

Our Common Father – The rejection of this is the source of all human difficulties

Spirit of the Child – The state of being a Child in relationship with its parents

Not Western Adoption – A spiritual coming of age, a Jewish Bar Mitzvah

Sons and Daughters – God wants sons and daughters after His own heart

Our Father – Those who have chosen to return to His heart and be what He is.

Becoming What You Are! – Sons of the Father of Light!

Adoption of the Body – Not only of our spiritual condition but our bodies as well

Liberty of Sons – Our souls are saved one thought, want and way at a time

Transformation – Creep out of our cocoons and spread our heaven-storming wings

The Sons of God! – To become a son of God, this is what I was born to be!

Creation as Our Nursery – The whole world exists for our education

Romans 8:15 NKJV

“For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’”

The most beautiful and challenging thing in the world is to cry *Abba Father* from a full heart! And I would help everyone I could to call upon this Father. – George MacDonald

Adoption?

There are doctrines in every form of systematic teaching of Christianity that hinder and frustrate the natural outgoing of the heart to our Heavenly Father. Some of these doctrines render it simply impossible. The more fragile the child's heart, the easier it is to be discouraged and thus hindered. Or it is entirely paralyzed by even the suspicion of a cold Divine reception. One such cold wind that blows at the very gate of heaven is the so-called doctrine of Adoption. Thank God, it is only here, not there at the entrance of heaven!

When a heart hears and believes or even partially considers at the very beginning of its life that it is not a child of God by origin but must be adopted into God's family, its love is chilled! Where is my Father, and who is this that would adopt me? To me, in the morning of my childhood, this evil doctrine of adoption was a mist through which light struggled to appear. It was a repellent presence, a phantom cloud that seemed to require mature thoughts and more accurate insights to dissipate. In truth, it required neither knowledge nor insight to stand up to this horrible doctrine, but rather the awareness of the Father's love that is undeniable and the courage to question it!

Just taking God's side with a devoted and honest suspicion and not yielding to any so-called religious authority is absolutely necessary to know the liberty of Him who sets us free. Nothing any group may think, believe, or teach must be allowed to come between us and our Father's heart. It is He Himself that is the teacher of His children. To accept true authority, may require the refusal of what human authority may teach. The truth of our love and acceptance could remain altogether misunderstood because of the lack of the natural process of doubt and inquiry. The process that we are intended to go through by Him, who wants us to understand.

Our Common Father

Since no scripture is of private interpretation, the cold mist of this would be in every human heart to one degree or another as it was in mine. I conclude many have groaned under the cold wind of the supposed truth, the doctrine of adoption. **At the heart of all human difficulties and misery is a lie, a refusal to see God as our common Father! The removal of this mist is the removal of the very foundation of all life's difficulties!**

"Is God not my Father," cries the heart of the child, "What need would I have to be adopted by Him?"

Adoption would never satisfy my heart!

So, who is my Father?

Am I not His from the beginning?

Is God not my true Father?

Is He only my Father in some form or fashion of legal maneuvering or transaction?

To accept adoption would be to acknowledge that I am the child of another. If God is the source of my being, then adoption does not mean reception but rejection. "O Father, am I not your child?"

No, you are not His child, but He will call you His child.

"Alas!" cries the child, "If He is not my Father, He cannot become my Father!" A father is a father from the beginning, the origin of my being.

Can any rejection, even by God, undo the fruits of a preexistent origin?

But in whatever way I have become an unworthy child, I do not cease to be His. His child in the way that a child will forever be the son or daughter of the one from whom they have come. Is this not the truth, the complaint of my heart asks, at this concept of adoption? Is it not the spirit in His child that cries out, "Abba, Father"?

Spirit of the Child

"...the spirit of adoption: whereby we cry Abba, Father." Romans 8:15

Away with your adoption! I could not be adopted if I were not of the same nature as my Father. As much as we love our pets, you cannot adopt one and make it your child. A child must be of the same nature for the word of God to come to it, yes, even the divine nature, the image of God Himself!

Wholeheartedly, I concede that if God had abandoned me and the Spirit had stopped convicting me, I would not cry out to Them. I would not have cared when someone told me I was not God's child. But my Father has never rejected me. Therefore, He has no need or desire to adopt me. Why would I care unless I knew in myself I was His child! If you say, because you have learned to love Him, I answer – Adoption would satisfy the love of one who was not a child but could become one. For me, I cannot do without a Father, nor can any adoption give me one.

However bad I may be, I am a child of God, and in the conviction of sin lies my hope. It is the guarantee of what I am and what I am not. The call to what I will one day be, the child of God in Spirit and Truth.

Our English translation of this teaching is very misleading. The apostle Paul is the only one in the New Testament who uses the Greek word "niothesia," narrowly defined as "placed as one's child." This definition is, I presume, the sole ground for its translation as adoption. **However, placing "niothesia" in the context as Paul teaches is contrary to this concept of Western adoption. Luther translates it, "the spirit of the child" or childship. Childship is the state or condition of being a child, the child's relationship with their parent.**

Of two things, I am sure. First, by "niothesia," Paul did not mean adoption. Secondly, if translators had experienced what I did because of this word? If they had felt it come between their heart and God's as I did? They would not have put it in their translations.

Once again, I say, Paul's use of this Greek word does not imply that God adopts children that are not His own. But rather a second time, He fathers his own, a birth, a transformation from above. Through this transformation, He will make Himself infinitely more their Father. He will bring them back into the heart of His very being from where they came; so that we might learn that we can live nowhere else! God will have us with Him. It was for this purpose that His Son died for us!

Not Western Adoption

Let's look at Galatians 4:1-7 NASB, where Paul reveals his use of the word adoption.

"Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also, we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore, you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God."

How can the translators use "an heir through God" and keep the word adoption? **From the passage, Paul is as clear as he could be by using the word "niothesia" he means the raising of a father's own child through tutelage and subjection to others to the place as a son. Only a child could become a son or daughter. This whole idea is one of a spiritual coming of age, a Jewish Bar mitzvah. Only when a child is a man is he really and fully a son.**

This principle holds true of earthly families as well. Often children do not see, realize, or understand their parents or parenting until they leave home or are parents themselves. To be a child does not automatically make you a son or daughter. "Childship" is the lower or starting condition in the maturing process towards sonship. It is the soil in which sonship grows. Not knowing your "childship" renders sonship impossible!

Sons and Daughters

Our heavenly Father, just as earthly parents, cannot be content just to have children. He wants sons and daughters after His own heart—sons and daughters after His own soul, spirit, and love. Not only in His love and devotion to them, or their love for Him but in that we love like Him, love as He loves!

For this relationship, adoption will not do. He dies to give us Himself, thereby raising us to His own heart. Transforming us out of Himself and into Himself, for our Father is the one and the all.

Once we can be at home with Him without fear and able to feel, think, and judge as he does, only then are we His son or daughter. The sole purpose of our being, why we were created, is to seek the same ends and love in the same way as He does. It is the one end of our being and includes all others entirely.

It can only be through unbelief, not faith in God, that some try to convince others that God has cast them off. That God has rejected them and said that they are not and never were His children. He has always been spending Himself to help us become the children He designed and foreordained us to be. Free children who would embrace Him as their Father! He has always been our Father, but we cannot fully benefit until we respond to our childhood in Him, until we allow the dove of His tenderness to rest upon us. **He is our Father, but we refuse to surrender to Him as His children! Because we are His children, we must become His sons and daughters. Nothing will satisfy Him or us until we become one with Him! What else could ever do! How else could life ever be good!**

Because we are the sons of God, we must become the sons of God!

Our Father

In my childhood, my father was a refuge from the difficulties and pains of life. So, let me speak to those who have found no comfort or safety in the name father. You must interpret Fatherhood as having those good things you have missed. You need to see Him in those times when someone has been a refuge from the wind, a hiding place from the storms, and the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. Those are times when a father would have been a father indeed. Happy are you if you have found such a sanctuary in a man or woman, but realize they are but shadows of the perfect One. You were seeing only the back of the perfect Son and Father. The best of all human tenderness, desire, and readiness to love and infinitely more is our love perfect Father! Our heavenly Father is the creator of fatherhood, the Father of all the fathers of the earth. Especially the Father of those who have shown a father's heart.

This Father would draw to Himself sons and daughters indeed. Not merely having originated in His heart, but having returned to Him and chosen to be what He is. God created us to share in His being and nature. To be strong as He is strong, tender and gracious like Him, and even angry when and how He is angry.

Even in the small matters of power, He would have us be like His Son, Jesus, whose life on earth was that of the perfect man, the ideal representation of humanity.

Everything in time must be subject to man, as it was subject to the Man Jesus Christ. Once the Father can have His way with a person, that person may have his way with the world. Just as Jesus when He walked upon the water.

" Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father." John 14:12 NASB

God, whose pleasure brought
Man into being, stands away

As it were, a hand's width off, to give
Room for the newly-made to live.

Becoming What You Are!

Creation's origins lie within the mind and heart of the Trinity. Therefore our Divine destiny is in becoming what we are! In creation, the Word expressed the Father's thoughts about us, and the Spirit made them so! So we, humanity, were made in Their "image and likeness" and have within us Their Divine Life! And this Life is the Light that reveals everything. Those who choose to live in a relationship with the Light, living as Jesus lived, living in obedience to the Father's love, realize and participate in their own becoming! And this Light guides our journey into the fulness of Their Eternal Life. Jesus, the firstborn in His incarnation and vicarious Life, lives for all humanity. And so through Jesus, we are alive with Their Life in our obedience and union with Him!

"Yet wherever men did accept him he gave them the power to become sons of God. These were the men who truly believed in him, and their birth depended not on the course of nature nor on any impulse or plan of man, but on God." John 1:12 Phillips

The Father does not make us sons but gives us power, as Their children, to become sons. By choosing and obeying the Truth, that is living and loving with Their Life. By this Life, we are transformed into what we are! That is fulfilling our destiny by becoming one with Them and sharing in the Father of Light!

Adoption of the Body

It was never Paul's intention to write a system of theology. This purpose is easy to see in that he does not hesitate to use this Greek word, one that perhaps he made up himself, in different and opposing, but not contrary ways. His different use and context are always enlivening each other. **His ideas are so large that they surpass his language and strain the use of existing words. In one place, he speaks of sonship as belonging to the Israelites. In another to anyone who has learned to cry, "Abba, Father!" And in yet another, Romans eight, of "niosthesia" as still yet to come. Not only as our spiritual condition but as our bodily one as well. All of these are entirely consistent with his concept here of "becoming."**

"And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." Romans 8:23 NASB.

It is not hard to understand that this placing of sons has both an inward and outward reality. The outward depending entirely on the inward and arising from it and revealing it. When the child has passed from this season of tutors and taken his place as a son, he would naturally change his dress and way of living. This change from God's children being like slaves under the law and duty to living as sons in love for God and their neighbor. The transformation would require the change of spiritual and bodily garments from those of slavery to freedom. We are laying aside our body of death and appearing in our transformed bodies of Life!

Liberty of Sons

Unfortunately, there are still children who have learned to cry, Abba, Father, who are still far away from their liberty as sons of God. Sons they are and no longer children, yet still groaning for their full freedom in Christ. Paul is only writing a letter here and not a system of theology. Nevertheless, he has given us plenty to work out his idea and give it a true form.

For we are sons of God the moment we lift our hearts, seeking to be sons, crying Father. But even as the world is redeemed, a few children at a time. So, our souls are saved in only a few of our thoughts, wants, and ways at a time. It takes a long time to complete our new creation as sons and daughters.

As creation has taken thousands, if not millions of years, so our perfection will not happen in a day. The Divine process will indeed move much faster now that we are consciously participating. Our participation brings the groundwork and preparations to bear in our lives, but our end is still far beyond the horizon of our vision.

Paul speaks at times of things to come and at others as if they have already occurred when they have indeed only just begun. So too, our thoughts are like that. Our heart may leap with joy the moment a hand grabs us while we are drowning in the waves, and we cry, "I am saved!" And we may now be safe, but a long way from being saved. **So then, we are sons the moment we cry, Father, but a long way from being free and mature sons. So long as there is the least distrust, hate, or fear, we have not received our full sonship. We have not received such life as raised Jesus from the dead.**

Transformation

Until our outward condition as sons divine and these mortal bodies remain as torn and stained, weak and weary, old and forgetful and weighted with earthly things, we have not yet received our sonship in full. We are but preparing to one day creep out of our cocoons, our chrysalids, preparing to spread our great heaven-storming wings in the consciousness of our God! We groan under the process, waiting for our full sonship, the redemption of the body. That is the uplifting of the body as a fit house and revelation of the indwelling Spirit, a fit temple as Christ has!

We will always need bodies to manifest and reveal ourselves to each other. The body is redeemed when it is fit for the sons of God and is the revelation of them. The body we were meant for, and always, more or less imperfectly had. Such it will be when Truth is strong enough in us to make it so! For it is the soul that makes the body. When we are the sons of God in heart and soul, then we will be in the body too!

"...we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is." 1 John 3:2 NASB

I do not care to speculate on the kind of body this will be, but only to say two things. First, it will be recognizable as us, and secondly, it will reveal our true being without the former body's defects and imperfections. Even through the bodily presence, we will know our bodies infinitely better and find in them endlessly more joy than before.

The Sons of God!

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly 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 also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." Romans 8:18-25 NASB

God will reveal his sons as they are truly are in character, appearance, and place when they sit with the Son of God on the throne of their Father. Only then shall creation be set free and find its freedom in the joy of their sonship!

Let the heathen mock and the unjust despise the heart that cries, Abba, Father! The God of creation will do right by His handiwork, though its high birth was delayed. Can the human spirit be more compassionate than God's to His creation?

If you find my interpretation unsatisfactory, spend your energy making sure your progress in the way of freedom and sonship is sure. **Right opinions on the greatest of questions deliver and heal no one! But to become a son of God, this I was born to be! Until I am, pains and troubles will endure, and so they should. Until we are the Sons of God we were born to be, we will never find life a good thing.**

Both Jesus and His love-slave Paul have represented God as a Father perfect in love, abundant in self-forgetfulness, supreme in righteousness, and entirely devoted to the lives of His children! I will not believe less of the Father that I can conceive of the glory in the revelation He has given me. After the radiance of the glory seen in the face of His Son. Jesus is the perfect image of the Father, by which we imperfect images are to understand Him. While we are yet imperfect, we see well enough to move towards perfection!

Creation as Our Nursery

So, for Paul, it all comes down to this: the world exists for our education. It is the nursery of the children of God. Served by troubled slaves, for we are but slaves ourselves. Beyond its own will or understanding, the whole creation works for the maturing of God's children into the sons of God. When at last, the children have risen and gone to their Father. When they are clothed, with a ring on their finger and shoes on their feet, finally shining out in their predestined sonship, then creation will break out into singing, and the trees and fields will clap their hands.

Then will the lion lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them. The fables of a golden age, which faith invented, and unbelief thrust into the past, will unfold into essential reality! Then shall every ideal show that it was necessary; every aspiration being satisfied will put forth even greater wings, and the hunger for righteousness be filled! Then for the first time, we will know what was in the Shepherd's mind when He said, "I come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

CLIFFNOTES WITH ORIGINAL MACDONALD QUOTES

Adoption?

When a heart hears—and believes, or half believes—that it is not the child of God by origin, from the first of its being, but may possibly be adopted into his family, its love sinks at once in a cold faint: where is its own father, and who is this that would adopt it? To myself, in the morning of childhood, the evil doctrine was a mist through which the light came struggling,

Our Common Father

The refusal to look up to God as our Father is the one central wrong in the whole human affair; the inability, the one central misery: whatever serves to clear any difficulty from the way of the recognition of the Father, will more or less undermine every difficulty in life.

But it avails nothing, either for my heart or their argument, to say I have fallen and been cast out: can any repudiation, even that of God, undo the facts of an existent origin? Nor is it merely that he made me: by whose power do I go on living? When he cast me out, as you say, did I then begin to draw my being from myself—or from the devil? In whom do I live and move and have my being? It cannot be that I am not the creature of God.'

Spirit of the Child

The relation of the word [Greek: niotesia] to the form [Greek: thetos], which means "taken," or rather, "placed as one's child," is, I presume, the sole ground for the so translating of it: usage plentiful and invariable could not justify that translation here, in the face of what St. Paul elsewhere shows he means by the word. The Greek word might be variously meant—though I can find no use of it earlier than St. Paul; the English can mean but one thing, and that is not what St. Paul means. "The spirit of adoption" Luther translates "the spirit of a child;" adoption he translates *kindschaft*, or *childship*'

Once more I say, the word used by St Paul does not imply that God adopts children that are not his own, but rather that a second time he fathers his own; that a second time they are born—this time from above; that he will make himself tenfold, yea, infinitely their father: he will have them back into the very bosom whence they issued, issued that they might learn they could live nowhere else; he will have them one with himself. It was for the sake of this that, in his Son, he died for them.

Not Western Adoption

From the passage it is as plain as St. Paul could make it, that, by the word translated adoption, he means the raising of a father's own child from the condition of tutelage and subjection to others, a state which, he says, is no better than that of a slave, to the position and rights of a son. None but a child could become a son; the idea is—a spiritual coming of age; only when the child is a man is he really and fully a son.

Sons and Daughters

God can no more than an earthly parent be content to have only children: he must have sons and daughters— children of his soul, of his spirit, of his love—not merely in the sense that he loves them, or

even that they love him, but in the sense that they love like him, love as he loves. For this he does not adopt them; he dies to give them himself, thereby to raise his own to his heart;

He is our father all the time, for he is true; but until we respond with the truth of children, he cannot let all the father out to us; there is no place for the dove of his tenderness to alight. He is our father, but we are not his children. Because we are his children, we must become his sons and daughters. Nothing will satisfy him, or do for us, but that we be one with our father! What else could serve! How else should life ever be a good! Because we are the sons of God, we must become the sons of God.

Father would make to himself sons and daughters indeed—that is, such sons and daughters as shall be his sons and daughters not merely by having come from his heart, but by having returned thither—children in virtue of being such as whence they came, such as choose to be what he is. He will have them share in his being and nature—strong wherein he cares for strength; tender and gracious as he is tender and gracious; angry where and as he is angry.

Becoming What You Are!

He has made us, but we have to be. All things were made through the Word, but that which was made in the Word was life, and that life is the light of men: they who live by this light, that is, live as Jesus lived—by obedience, namely, to the Father, have a share in their own making; the light becomes life in them; they are, in their lower way, alive with the life that was first born in Jesus, and through him has been born in them—by obedience they become one with the godhead:

'As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.'

He does not make them the sons of God, but he gives them power to become the sons of God: in choosing and obeying the truth, man becomes the true son of the Father of lights.

Adoption of the Body

His ideas are so large that they tax his utterance and make him strain the use of words, but there is no danger to the honest heart, which alone he regards, of misunderstanding them, though 'the ignorant and unsteadfast wrest them' yet. At one time he speaks of the sonship as being the possession of the Israelite, at another as his who has learned to cry Abba, Father; and here, in the passage I have now last to consider, that from the 18th to the 25th verse of this same eighth chapter of his epistle to the Romans, he speaks of the niotesia as yet to come—and as if it had to do, not with our spiritual, but our bodily condition. This use of the word, however, though not the same use as we find anywhere else, is nevertheless entirely consistent with his other uses of it.

Liberty of Sons

We are the sons of God the moment we lift up our hearts, seeking to be sons—the moment we begin to cry Father. But as the world must be redeemed in a few men to begin with, so the soul is redeemed in a few of its thoughts and wants and ways, to begin with: it takes a long time to finish the new creation of this redemption.

So are we sons when we begin to cry Father, but we are far from perfected sons. So long as there is in us the least taint of distrust, the least lingering of hate or fear, we have not received the sonship; we have not such life in us as raised the body of Jesus; we have not attained to the resurrection of the dead—by which word, in his epistle to the Philippians (iii. 2), St. Paul means, I think, the same thing as here he means by the sonship which he puts in apposition with the redemption of the body:

Transformation

Until our outward condition is that of sons royal, sons divine; so long as the garments of our souls, these mortal bodies, are mean—torn and dragged and stained; so long as we groan under sickness and weakness and weariness, old age, forgetfulness, and all heavy things; so long we have not yet received the sonship in full—we are but getting ready one day to creep from our chrysalids, and spread the great heaven-storming wings of the psyches of God. We groan being burdened; we groan, waiting for the sonship—to wit, the redemption of the body—the uplifting of the body to be a fit house and revelation of the indwelling spirit— nay, like that of Christ, a fit temple and revelation of the deeper indwelling God.

The Sons of God!

Right opinion on questions the most momentous will deliver no man. Cure for any ill in me or about me there is none, but to become the son of God I was born to be. Until such I am, until Christ is born in me, until I am revealed a son of God, pain and trouble will endure—and God grant they may! Call this presumption, and I can only widen my assertion: until you yourself are the son of God you were born to be, you will never find life a good thing.

Creation as Our Nursery

The world exists for our education; it is the nursery of God's children, served by troubled slaves, troubled because the children are themselves slaves—children, but not good children. Beyond its own will or knowledge, the whole creation works for the development of the children of God into the sons of God. When at last the children have arisen and gone to their Father; when they are clothed in the best robe, with a ring on their hands and shoes on their feet, shining out at length in their natural, their predestined sonship; then shall the mountains and the hills break forth before them into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.