

**Manifesting the Manifold Wisdom of God**  
**Adoption: The Christian Identity and Priority** (Ephesians 1:5)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on January 17, 2016

## Introduction

- ❖ This morning it's our honor to join other churches across the nation in observing Sanctity of Human Life Sunday. It falls on the third Sunday in January, timed with the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. It was January 22, 1973 when the Supreme Court handed down a decision that essentially made abortion a legal right in all fifty states.
  
- ❖ According to the CDC, in the past forty-three years of legalized abortion over 58.5 million have occurred in our country.<sup>1</sup> That's a daunting figure when you consider we're talking about **58.5 million unborn children**. That's about equivalent to the estimated death toll for WWII if you include civilian casualties. We have 58.5 million reasons to grieve and lament.
  - ▶ **But even so, there are encouraging signs of hope.** Since the mid-2000s national abortion rates have been consistently falling each year. Between the last two reporting years ('12-'15) there's been a 4.2% drop across the nation. Public opinion on abortion have also been shifting. A solid majority of Americans are opposed to the vast majority of elective abortions performed annually. **More people are expressing a desire to see more legal restrictions on abortion.**
    - So bottomline, what the trends suggest is that more and more women and families across our country are rejecting abortion as a solution to an unplanned pregnancy. **And one of those God-pleasing alternatives that more people are turning to is the practice of adoption.**
  
- ❖ That's what I'd like us to focus on this Sanctity of Life Sunday. As I mentioned last week, it fits perfectly with the sermon series though Ephesians that we just started. We're still in chapter 1 where Paul goes on for fourteen verses recounting all the spiritual blessings that God has freely chosen to bestow on his people through our union with his Son. And one of those particular blessings is **the blessing of adoption as sons**. Read again with me starting at the end of v4, "*In love <sup>5</sup>he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will*". **[PRAY]**
  
- ❖ **It was almost 25 years ago when I was adopted. I grew up an orphan, but as a young teen, I was welcomed into a loving family.** I was adopted. That shouldn't surprise any of you. You already knew that about me. I've shared my testimony before of how I was saved as a teenager through the ministry of this church.
  - ▶ **It's true that I wasn't an orphan in the sense of having been abandoned by my birth parents.** No, they raised me. They're great parents. So I wasn't that kind of an orphan. But in actuality, my condition was far worse. **I was an alien and stranger to the family of God** (Eph. 2:12). I was a son of disobedience, following the course of this world, the prince of the power of the air (2:2). I was by nature a child of wrath just like the rest of mankind (2:3). I was dead in my sins and trespasses.

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<sup>1</sup> See online: <http://www.nrlc.org/communications/stateofabortion/>

- ❖ But God. He made me alive in Christ. He washed me of all the filth I was wallowing in. He garbed me new clothes of righteousness. He gave me a new name. I was no longer a slave but a son. I was welcomed into his family and given a seat at the head table. There's really no better way to describe it. I was adopted by God.
- ❖ **I realize to speak of my salvation in this way, in terms of being an orphan, being adopted, sounds strange.** It might sound cheeky. But that's unfortunate. It shows how much we've lost this way of understanding our salvation. So adoption ends up being seen as merely a social issue that some Christian families and churches are active in. We're glad for it, but adoption is never something we saw for ourselves.
  - ▶ Look, I'm in no way suggesting that it's imperative for every Christian family to adopt. Your level of involvement will differ. Just as I don't expect every Christian to be equally involved with issue of abortion. **But no involvement, no concern, no prayer or support – that's untenable for followers of Christ.**
- ❖ **I believe** once the scriptural connections are recovered between **the blessing of spiritual adoption** and **the practice of earthly adoption**, then each will reveal more glorious things about the other. So to that end I've divided this message into two parts. First, we'll consider how adoption is essential to our **Christian identity**. Then we'll talk about its place in our **Christian priorities**. And as a real treat, we'll get the privilege of hearing from a family in our church who adopted last summer.

### The Christian Identity

- ❖ Let's start by considering the issue of identity. If you listen to the experts, they talk about how adopted children are prone to having an identity crisis at some point in their lives. They hit an age where they begin to wrestle with the question, "*Who am I?*"
  - ▶ Really it's no different for Christians. **There's always a point in the Christian life where we face a crisis of identity.** *Who am I? Am I really a child of God? Am I really part of his family?* We start to question ourselves.
- ❖ Maybe because you keep falling back into the same patterns of sin. Your struggles remain the same. You want to believe you're a child of God, but nothing seems to have changed.
  - ▶ Or maybe your identity crisis stems from the distance you feel towards God. You haven't seen any response to your prayers. You don't sense his presence or power working in your life. At first, you thought you were just in a funk, but now this spiritual dryness has stretched on for years. *Who am I? Am I really a child of God? Am I really part of his family?*
- ❖ **The challenge here is believing in something you're told but not something you see.** In adoption, you're told you're a child of God now, but when you look at yourself, at your life, you just don't see it. **That's because adoption is a legal reality and not necessarily a felt reality.** You don't feel the change. You wouldn't even know it happened to you unless you're told. You're adopted way before you ever come to understand your adoption.

- ❖ It's a lot like your **justification**. Your justification occurred the moment you became a Christian. It was a judicial act that took place in the courtroom of heaven. It's where God forgave your sins and accepted you as righteous in his sight because you've been united with Christ through faith. You're *in Christ*, covered in his blood and righteousness.
  - ▶ **So if you're in Christ, you were justified way before anyone told you what happened.** Way before you came to understand it. And now the daily struggle is to believe it. In the courtroom of heaven there's no debate. The declaration is final. You're accepted by God. And yet in the courtroom of our own conscience, the debate rages on. **Living by faith and not by sight means believing in the declarations of the gospel more than the accusations of our conscience.**
  
- ❖ The same applies to adoption. **Adoption is primarily a status change. Not a subjective change.** A legal reality. Not a felt reality. You were once slaves to sin. That was your identity in the flesh. **But when you're in Christ, you're given a new status as sons of God.** That's your new identity. But that's a gospel blessing that must be received by faith and not by sight.
  - ▶ The adopted child still sitting in the orphanage may be told she's been chosen, that the paperwork went through, that she's legally adopted, that her new parents are coming very soon to get her. But she's still going to struggle. *Is it really true? Am I really a daughter now? Or still an orphan? Who am I really?*
    - And even when she's in her new home, with her new family, the identity crisis may persist. *Is this for real? Is this forever? Am I a real daughter or just an orphan pretending?*
  
- ❖ In his book *Adopted for Life*, **Russell Moore** recounts his experience when he brought home his two adopted sons from Russia.<sup>2</sup> They were just a year old, born three weeks apart. Moore said one of the first questions people at church would ask is, "Are they brothers?"
  - ▶ And his reply was always, "They are now." But one lady said to him, "Yes. I know. But are they really brothers." And as graciously as he could he replied, "Yes, now they are both our children, so they are now really brothers." He said the lady just sighed, rolled her eyes, and said, "Well, you know what I mean."
    - Of course we all know what she means. She means, "Do the two boys share a common biological ancestry?" A common bloodline. A common set of DNA. The same birth mother. That's what makes you 'brothers'. *Really* brothers.
  
- ❖ This is how the world thinks. And, be honest, this is how *we* tend to think. Do you see why Christians are prone to having an identity crisis?
  - ▶ **Church, are we really brothers?** Are we *really* children of God, together of the same family? If you think about it, that's the big question the Ephesians faced. **Paul was writing to a congregation of Jewish and Gentile believers who were asking each other, "Are we really brothers?"**

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<sup>2</sup> Russell Moore, *Adopted for Life*, pgs. 23-24.

- ❖ “We look nothing alike. We don’t share the same bloodline. We’re not of the same ethnicity or nationality. Sure, you can call us ‘brothers’ in that figurative sense. But are we *really* brothers? You know what I mean.”
  - ▶ We have no issue calling ourselves a church family. But in the end, blood runs thicker. **In the end, the color of your skin, the nationality of your birth, the culture you were raised in – is of greater significance than who are we in Christ.**
  
- ❖ But Paul will have none of that. **One of his purposes in writing Ephesians is to help Jewish and Gentile believers, coming from different families, different ethnicities, different nationalities, to root their identity fundamentally in Christ.** You were predestined in love for adoption as sons through Jesus. In Christ, you are *really* brothers.
  
- ❖ But even this is not the crux of our crisis. Coming to believe the brotherhood of the saints is one thing. But to truly believe that Jesus is my brother is a whole other! At the core of our identity crisis is the question: ***Are sinful believers and a sinless Savior really brothers?***
  - ▶ That’s the hardest thing to believe. That’s when an identity crisis hits us the hardest, when we measure ourselves against the Only Begotten Son. We look at Jesus. We look at his perfect love for the Father, his perfect obedience, his perfect submission, his perfect service. And it can be depressing. **Our orphan-instincts kick in and we fear we’ll never measure up to the Father’s expectations.** We’ll never be as good as Jesus. *Is this adoption for real? Forever? Am I really part of the family?*
  
- ❖ I understand if you have these fears. If you’ve never felt with this, if you’ve never had a crisis of identity after considering the Son of God in all his perfections, then you probably have an unrealistic view of yourself.
  - ▶ Imagine you were in the process of adopting a child.<sup>3</sup> And as you sit down with the social worker at the final stage before taking the child home, you’re told this 10-year-old boy has a history of violence with the other kids and has been in and out of psychotherapy for years. He keeps burning things and makes knives out of everyday objects. There’s a ton of mental health issues in his family history, and one of his relatives on his father’s side was a sexual predator and another a serial murderer.
    - Now be honest. Would you go through with it? Would you adopt this kid? And if you did, would you let him play alone in the kitchen with your natural-born son with the kitchen knife set right there on the counter? Would you treat them equally as sons? **Would you love them just the same as *real* brothers?**
  
- ❖ But do you see? That’s you. That’s me. **We’re that orphan who is inexplicably adopted by God.** Not for no reason. Just for a reason that escapes us, that we can’t humanly explain. It just says in v5 that we were adopted, “*according to the purpose (reason) of his will*”. And we’re told in v6 is that this purpose leads, “*to the praise of his glorious grace.*”

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<sup>3</sup> I am borrowing an illustration given by Russell Moore on pg. 29 of his book.

- ❖ In the ancient Roman world, adoption was practiced but not in the way we do it. **We usually adopt infants. But in the Roman world, you would adopt a young man.** It might be a wealthy landowner who has no sons. So he finds a young man he respects, who proves himself fit to carry on the family name and take care of the family estate. The landowner legally adopts the young man guaranteeing for himself a son, an heir.
  - ▶ So when Paul talks about God adopting you and how he did it – how he chose you before the foundation of the world – **it just proves that your sonship (your legal status as sons of God) is a pure gift of grace.** It wasn't in response to your respectability, your fitness to be a worthy heir. **You're a son now simply because God chose in love to make you one.**
  
- ❖ Now just as an aside, **I'm not sure if some of you ladies are bothered by the term sonship.** You might be thinking it would've been better if v5 said, "he predestined us for adoption as sons *and daughters*". That would've made it more gender inclusive.
  - ▶ But trust me, ladies, you don't want that. Paul is doing something very subversive here. In his day, women were never recipients of an inheritance. That's the whole reason you'd adopt a son if all you had were daughters. So for Paul to call you "sons" who have the rights of sonship, a share in the inheritance – that's radical! **You would be stripping all that way if you rejected the identity of a "son of God".**
    - And just to be fair, as a man, I've struggled with the idea of being a member of the Bride of Christ. But in the end, I'm thankful that's my identity.
  
- ❖ **So the point I'm making is that God was in no desperate need for an heir.** He had a Son. He had the perfect heir. And yet God chose to set his adopting love on us. It was his choice to adopt you. And it wasn't because he was running out of choices. He wasn't desperate. It was out of his own free and sovereign love.
  - ▶ **So there's no reason to fear that God will ever be disappointed in his choice of you.** The thought of sending you back has never crossed his mind and never will. **And there's no need to fear that God will love his only Begotten Son with greater affection than you.** That you'll be left out in the cold if you can't perform to same level as Christ. There's no competition here. At least not coming from Jesus.
  
- ❖ You don't understand the kind of Elder Brother you have. He even prayed for you in John 17 that all the world would realize that the Father loves us even as he loves the Son (Jn. 17:23). **Scripture says God loves us with the same intensity as he loves Jesus.**
  - ▶ And all that belongs to Jesus as the Rightful Heir is shared with us. We are as Romans 8:17 describes it, "*co-heirs with Christ*". We get a share in his inheritance. That's means adoption is costly. But not for us as the ones adopted.
  
- ❖ Think about the **parable of the prodigal son.** Remember how the younger brother takes his share of the inheritance, disowns his family, and sets out for a far country. But in short order he spends all his inheritance in lavish living until he's left broken and penniless.

- ❖ When he finally comes to his senses he heads back home with the plan to ask to be received back as hired help. He's going to tell his dad, "I'll work for you. I'll earn my keep around here." But the father will have none of that talk.
  - ▶ He embraces his son. Puts a ring on his finger. Throws a robe over his shoulders. Kills a fatten calf and throws his a party. His elder brother is returning home after a long day working the fields, and he's disgusted by his father's actions. His father tries to console him by saying, "All that is mine is yours."
    - But the elder brother is thinking, "Exactly. That's *my* inheritance that you're spending on this son of yours. That's *my* ring. That's *my* robe. That's *my* fatten calf. **The only way you can receive this prodigal back as your son is at my expense.** I'll have to share *my share* of the inheritance with him."
  
- ❖ That's how the elder brother in the parable responds. **But Jesus tells it to make the very point that he's the True and Better Elder Brother.** He actually joins the Father in celebrating the return of every prodigal. He knows the only way the Father can adopt you into the family, into a seat at the table, into a share of the inheritance – is at his expense.
  - ▶ **Unlike the prodigal's brother, Jesus endured the cost for the joy set before him. For the joy of having a brother and sister in you and me.** Our adoption was at his expense. At the expense of the cross. Where he hung forsaken by the Father as he bore the wrath our sins deserve. **You could say Jesus was abandoned and orphaned on that cross, so that orphans like us might receive the gift of adoption.**
  
- ❖ Do you see what this means? **When Christians adopt, they're dramatizing the gospel.** They have a unique opportunity to demonstrate God's free and sovereign love to choose a child not because of the child's worthiness or because of their desperation.
  - ▶ **Parents who adopt have a chance to represent the prodigal's father,** intentionally choosing to love a stranger with unconditional love. **Children who welcome an adopted sibling have a chance to represent the true elder brother,** sacrificially loving a stranger at their own expense.

### The Christian Priority

- ❖ As a church, I'd say we've been good at building up a culture that encourages and upholds marriage – not just as a societal good – but as a means of displaying the gospel with the most important relationship in our lives. And what we're saying today is let's do the same with adoption. Let's build a culture that encourages and upholds adoption as a unique means to glorify God by displaying the gospel with our relationships, with our lives.
  - ▶ **And just as we don't expect every Christian single to get married, we don't expect every Christian couple to adopt.** But what we do expect is for every Christian to make the cause of adoption a greater priority. To encourage it and consider it, to honestly pray about it. And even if we're not personally called to adopt, let's uphold couples that are.
    - That's why I've asked Phil and Jennifer Chii to share with us their experience of recently adopting. **[INVITE TO STAGE]**

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## Testimony Shared by Phil and Jennifer Chii

On June 28, 2013, while we were going about our daily lives and preparing to celebrate Maddy's first birthday party the following week, another mother made the impossible decision of abandoning her 7 day old daughter on a busy street corner in Zhengzhou, China. For two years the little baby lived in an orphanage of 700 children and shared beds, caretakers, toys, never knowing where or who her family was.

On August 4th last year, we went to a government building in Zhengzhou, China and met Olivia for the first time. She was scared, hesitant and cautious of us. She would push away whenever we tried to touch her. The orphanage director said she must have been all out of tears as that morning she had cried the loudest and longest out of the 9 kids adopted that day. It took candy and stickers for her to finally warm up to us. But on this day, she was no longer alone in this world- her forever family had finally found her. She was no longer an orphan.

When we got married, even before our biological kids, we've had a heart for orphans. We had worked many times with orphanages in China and Mexico. But as we went along with our lives, we tucked away this thought of adoption. Life was already busy: establishing our careers, serving in the church, family, friends. Then we had Joey, bought a house, then had Maddy and things got busier. In Scriptures, we always knew that God has a special heart for orphans and had commanded us as Christians to take care of orphans. But when the time came, God asked- are you going to adopt? We had to decide if this what God desired for us and if we were going to be obedient to his calling. There were so many good excuses and fears - we are too busy already, what if we still wanted to have another biological child, How will this affect Joey and Maddy?, it's expensive. People would often asked- why would you adopt when you can have biological children? As we prayed and took an honest look at our lives we discovered that with our young family we were becoming more self centered and less God centered. God was asking us to live out the faith we said we believed.

God's adoption of believers, a common topic that you often hear at church became so real and personal. It was then, when we studied deeply adoption in scripture and started to truly understand the impact and depth of what God has done for us. That I myself, a sinner, who has nothing to offer, that God would not only save us but adopt us into His family- sharing in all of His kingdom and richness. That truth, that amazing adoption story that I am part of finally made sense and challenged us to take that step of faith to bring just one orphan into our family. It has been a blessing yet very humbling that we get to live out what God has done for us through adoption as we welcome Olivia into our family.

Through these 5 months at home, we have seen a dramatic transformation in Olivia's character. She transformed from what Phil calls "survival mode": a serious, cautious toddler always guarding her food and possessions to one that is always happy, smiling, and loves being around people. Now at night while in her crib instead of crying you can hear a little voice singing "Jesus loves me" with the cutest Chinese accent. Even in Joey & Maddy's life- we have seen this deepen their compassion and care as they are often question why her biological mom would leave her and in response say "we love our sister!" And lastly in our lives it has tested and refined our ability to love. We have learned more on what it means to truly love like Christ, more than all the mission trips and service projects we've been on combined. We have learned what it

means to have patience, to give unconditionally when there is nothing for you to gain. We have learned that unconditional love is and should be deeper than the blood of your family ties. We have learned that all Christians are witnesses of a powerful, an amazing Gospel story of our own adoption. And that as Christians, God calls us to not just enjoy in His blessings and richness He's provided, but to give it all- to care about what He cares about, to defend the weak and the fatherless. To live out our faith.

There are many ways you can be a part of orphan care- adopt, foster, sponsor, volunteer, donate, etc. We would love to and are available to talk to anyone who wants to know more.

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- ❖ I'm so thankful for Phil and Jennifer and for their children. **As you and I watch them raise Olivia with God-like love, it ministers to our souls.** When we see how Olivia is treated and loved in the same manner as Joey and Maddy; when we're reminded that she's *really* Joey's sister as much as Maddy is; that there's no difference – it speaks to our own identity crisis.
  - ▶ It reminds us that we, as the Church, are real brothers. That we share a real brotherhood. Which is rooted in our real brotherhood with Christ. He really is our Elder Brother. We truly are co-heirs with him.
  
- ❖ Church, if we want to develop a culture where adoption is much higher priority, then I'd suggest two places to start. **First, we need a complete mindshift where we no longer see the care of unwanted children as just a component of our social activism.** James 1:27 states, "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction*".
  - ▶ We need to recognize that issues like adoption and abortion are not peripheral to our religion but much closer to the center. That's the first thing that needs to happen if we want to foster a culture of life, especially one that values and protects the lives of unwanted children.
  
- ❖ **The second thing is we need to address is the issue of diversity among us as a church.** As long as our sense of brotherhood, of being a spiritual family, is limited to Christians of a common ancestry or common ethnicity, then it'll always be an uphill battle to convince Christians that having biological child is *not* more real than having adopted children. That two siblings of the same mother are *not* more related than the adopted ones.
  - ▶ The less familiarity we have in experiencing true brotherhood with Christians of very diverse backgrounds, then the less comfortable we'll be with the idea of adopting children that look very different than us and come from very different places.
    - **Building up a culture of adoption in our church requires building up a culture of diversity in all facets.** That's exactly what we want to emphasize this year with our ministry theme, *Many in One: Diversity in a Unified Church*. To that end, let's pray.