

What is a Christian? Someone who can call God Father

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[0:00] Very important for us to understand what is a Christian. All sorts of versions of answers to that cultural things to do with habit.

! I'm trying to put across that the Bible has a very deep and profound take on this question. What is a Christian?

Christian. That's really something. My aim this morning is to explain this in such a way that if you are a Christian, you will go away from here glad that you're a Christian.

That would be a good thing, wouldn't it? All sorts of worries, but to go away thinking, actually, it's a great thing to be a Christian. And if you're not a Christian, to make you wish that you were. Not Christians, want to be Christians. To go away thinking, that Christianity thing is so brilliant.

I want some of that. So that's my aim. See how well I get on with it. And my answer to this question today of what is a Christian is this. A Christian is someone who can call God his or her father.

[1:17] In other words, a child of God. So somebody who can look up into the face of God, the almighty one, the holy one, and say, that's my father.

And to live daily life, as it were, under the gaze, before the face of a God who is your heavenly father. Be able to speak to this God as one speaks to a father.

A heavenly father, obviously, but akin to how we would speak to a good father. And there is a future aspect to this too, which I'll explain in a few moments.

But there's a looking forward to the fulfillment of what it is to be a child of God. To be able to say, he is my father.

Jesus had that privilege. Uniquely. But when we see Jesus in his prayer and in the way that he lived, particularly in the way that he dealt with the extremities of life, he did so knowing that God was his father.

[2:46] He lived knowing that God was his father. He loved knowing that God was his father. He lent on God as his heavenly father. That's how Jesus lived.

And as we think about this, perhaps it might begin to dawn on us that as Christians, we have the same privilege that Jesus had.

That's really something. So let's bring it back to a human father and son relationship. This is my grandson and my son-in-law.

And I invite you to look at this. This is Jamie and Charlie. Can you see the picture clearly enough? Because I think it's a rather interesting picture. Look at the hands. Look at the smile.

If you can see the smile. The teeth, actually. The eye. The hairline. The t-shirt. Now, let me...

[3:46] I want to talk about this picture for a little bit. But I do so in the knowledge that not all father-son relationships are what they could be or should be. And it might be that your father was not the father he should have been.

So don't let the failure be the model. Let what it ought to be be the model. It might be that you have not been the father that you should have been. It might be that you have not been the son or daughter that you should have been.

So the relationships can go wrong. And I'm just being conscious of that. But I want to think about what it ought to be like. What it's meant to be like. You can see it in the picture. You can see them both smiling.

They've both got the same smile. There's a happiness in this relationship, isn't there? It's a happy relationship. There's security. So little Charlie's being held by his dad.

And it doesn't occur to him for a single microsecond that his dad will just let him go and fall on the floor and break his legs or something. There's a... Of course dads hold their children.

[4:49] There's security. There's love and affection. If you look at the way they're holding one another, the little hands holding the big hands. There's love and affection in that photo.

There's togetherness. Because you can see they're both wearing the same t-shirt. There's a sort of partnership there. There's a likeness. And there's a promise for the future.

You can't encapsulate that in a photo. I don't think you can. But I want us... That's not a misleading picture. To think of the relationship that God says we have with him if we're Christians.

So with that in mind, let me give you a couple of texts which spell this out. So I'm going to give you one from Galatians 4.4.

I put the whole thing in full on there. You might like to... If you want to turn to it and see the context, you're very welcome to do so. But I've quoted it here. It says... When the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

[6:07] That's what the NIV says. It does say that, doesn't it? Full rights of sons. That expression covers one word which we could say is adoption of sons.

We could say it's sonship. To redeem those under the law, that we might receive sonship. Full stop. Because you were sons, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts. The spirit who calls out Abba, father. Abba being the Aramaic, I believe, word for dad.

What a child would say to his father. Interesting, in Tamil, it's Appa. That's right, isn't it? Maybe different languages. It's a similar form of Appa, Abba.

Meaning dad. Dad. Usually mother, mama, amma, something like that. But dad, Abba. Father. And he says, you are no longer a slave, but a son.

[7:15] And since you are a son, God has also made you an heir. So you notice a number of features of that which we'll return to. You might be thinking, why is it so gender specific as sons?

And I'm going to notice that question and move straight on. I have, there's an answer to it later, but I'm not going to get tangled up in it just now. Here's another statement. This is from Ephesians 1, verse 5.

And this says, again, I'm just picking out this one verse. You're welcome to look at the whole context. Begins by saying, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in heavenly places with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

He says, For he chose us in him to be holy and blameless in his sight. That's a bit of a future reference there.

In love he predestined us, so as a backward time reference, what he did, he predestined us, to be adopted as his sons. That's that word, adoption, sonship again.

[8:18] Through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. That brings in the fact that God has planned this in a rather wonderful way.

That's Ephesians 1. Here's another statement from 1 John chapter 3, which is where we started and was the prompt for at least one of the songs that we've sung.

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.

It doesn't say sons there, it says children, not gender specific. And that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Dear friends, now we are the children of God, but what we will be, future, has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

[9:29] Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he, presumably Jesus, is pure. How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.

So there's three texts. The one that we're going to look at particularly is in Romans 8, so please do turn to this one, because you need to see this with your own eyes.

If you've got a Bible, Romans chapter 8. Big chapter, lots of things happening in it. I don't want us to get confused by all the different threads that are going on, because the thing we're looking at here is sonship.

Let me tell you that Paul's letter to the Romans is a grand defense of the Christian message. It's a grand defense, and he's got a few targets in mind.

And the fact that God's own nation, the Jews, the people who had the Old Testament, have mostly rejected Jesus. Now how can that be? What's going on there?

[10:32] And he spends quite a bit of time relating Christianity to the Old Testament, and particularly the law of Moses. He also spends time talking about why it is that Christians don't seem completely different.

If you're a believer, you still sin, and you still die. If you're dissected, not that you'd want to be, but I mean, if you died first, and then were dissected, you wouldn't look any different to somebody who's not a Christian.

So, he has that sort of thing in mind too. And he's trying to get people on board to tell the whole world about this message. That's where he's going with Romans, just to let you know what's going on there.

And he, in Romans chapter 8, he's got to the point where he's saying about the best things about this gospel. He talks about being united with Christ.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. No condemnation. It's a legal statement. Not condemned. Not guilty. He talks about the dynamic of the indwelling personal Holy Spirit.

[11:44] So, he talks about the mindset of the Spirit. And the version that was read to us talked about mind governed by the flesh, or governed by the Spirit.

And in this chapter, he talks about the way the Spirit gives us a mindset, or the Spirit has a mindset. And also, the Spirit has life and power.

So, you found that in verse 6, for example, where it says, the mind of the flesh is death. The mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.

So, we've got life, as well as, not just a mental attitude, but a power as well. He talks about the future resurrection of the body. Verse 11, he talks about giving life to your mortal bodies.

and he talks about the way we perceive this. Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[12:43] I just wanted to say, there's all those other things going on there, but that's, I want to talk about sonship. Woven into this, woven into the heart of this, is strong, woven into the heart of this defiant, strong joy, is sonship.

So, I've got, how many things? Five things, I think. It's a scandalous surprise, there's an inner drive, there's an instinctive cry, there's a double certainty, and there's a cosmic future.

So, five things, very Calvinistic, but, it's not to be five. Let's see, let's see how, with these, scandalous surprise, inner drive, instinctive cry, double certainty, cosmic future, number one, scandalous surprise.

The scandalous surprise is this, we don't have any right to be children of God. We don't have any right to be children of God. It's commonly thought that everybody can say the prayer, our Father, because God is Father to everybody.

And Paul says, no, it's actually, none of us has the right to call God our Father, except Jesus. He is the Father. He is the Son of the Father, eternally and beautifully.

[14:02] Look at chapter 9, verse 3. He's now talking about the Jews, and you remember that the Jews was one of the subjects of his letter?

Chapter 9, verse 3, he says, I wish I could, I wish I, I could wish I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.

Theirs is the adoption of sons, theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises. And in that, you notice he says, theirs is the adoption of sons.

So of all the nations in the world, according to God's plan, it is the Jews who have the right to be, or the promise to be, adopted as sons.

Theirs is the adoption of sons, he says. Not us, not us, English people, or Portuguese people, or Swiss people.

[15:06] We don't have that right. Theirs, it's theirs, theirs is the adoption of sons. God's family is Israel. And we're outsiders and strangers, and we should be sort of looking on and saying, how are they so privileged?

But Paul's point is that they failed in this. They didn't get it. The Jews stumbled, and they didn't get it.

Chapter 9, verse 32, talks about them stumbling. So the non-Jews, as Paul says, don't have a right to be the children of God.

And as it turns out, sadly, Paul says, I'm in anguish over this. The Jews haven't attained it either. They've stumbled. That's why I'm in anguish, says Paul. And he says, if anybody's going to be a child of God, it's got to be completely against the grain.

God's got to do something the Gentiles are out of it anyway. The Jews have stumbled. If anybody's going to be a child of God, he's got to do something completely new and different.

[16:13] And that's why he quotes in chapter 9, verse 25, get this. He says in Hosea, I will call them my people who are not my people.

I will call her my loved one who is not my loved one. So you get the idea that God will do something quite remarkable. These people are outside the family.

They're outside his love. But God says, they're not his people. God says, I'll make you my people. I'll give you my love. I'll make you part of my family. And in chapter 9, verse 26, it will happen in the very place where it was said to them, you are not my people.

They will be called sons of the living God. Do you get that? He's so gobsmacked. Is that a word? Gobsmacked. He's so taken by surprise. This is just amazing. People who have no right to be the people of God will become his people.

[17:15] People who are way outside his family will be called sons of the living God. The Christian word for it is grace.

Meaning, something wonderfully generous that God did that he didn't have to do. It's a scandalous surprise that anybody should be a child of God.

It's humbling. It's a bit alarming. Well, what were we then? It's sobering and it's amazing.

Are you surprised by this? Or did you think, oh, well, I always knew I was a child of God. No, you didn't. If you thought that, you got completely the wrong idea about yourself and about God.

To be able to be a child of God is an amazing surprise. It's people who are not my people who are called sons of God.

[18:20] That's why John can say, what an amazing thing. what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called children of God.

It's an amazing thing. We don't have any right to be children of God. There is some grounding intervention of God by his mighty grace and kindness.

And he's referring to that sort of thing at the beginning of chapter 8 where he says, what the Jewish law was powerless to do, God did by sending his son to be a sin offering. Without going into all the details of it, it was Jesus who changed that situation by dying on the cross.

Because he did that, we can be adopted. It's not by nature. It's by grace to disqualified, sinful outsiders. It's a scandalous surprise.

Number two, there's an undeniable inner drive. A child has a family similarity to his or her father.

[19:30] And it's not unknown for children to follow in their father's footsteps. Upholding the same values, I think there's probably more than one of us who have entered the same profession that our fathers were in.

Anybody want to be bold and say it was them? You were, weren't you? Because your dad was an architect. My dad was a teacher. I became a teacher.

It's not a law that you can't change, but in many times, people follow in the family business. in their work and profession. It wouldn't be unknown for children to support the same football club as their dad.

Anybody do that? Yeah. It's a funny thing, isn't it, that there seems to be a family drive towards something, family interests.

My dad, who died when he was in his 90s, I met one of his friends a little while after and she said, oh, I thought, Philip, I thought it was your dad coming in.

[20:59] I don't know quite sure how to take that, really. But, you walk the same. I thought, oh, really? I walk like a 90-year-old. I find my skin is turning like my dad's skin and things like that.

There's this likeness. Dads can sometimes get their kids into a work placement. So you end up, did your dad do that with you?

Did your dad say, get you into an architect's practice, do a little bit of, no? Ah, right. Okay, work from home. The text, verse 14, says this, those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. Get that? He's saying that there's a leading of the Spirit of God which belongs to the sons of God. So the Spirit leads in the things that the Father is into. He leads in the way that the Father would go, if you like.

[22:19] The same inner drive that is within the Father, if I can put it that way, comes to live in the sons. And the particular example he gives is in the previous phrase where he says in verse 13, if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Yeah? He's describing a drive and this is not a drive to be an architect or a teacher or to support a certain football club or cricket club, but it's a drive of holiness to make war on sin.

If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live because those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God. You get that connection between the family and the drive that motivates the family.

The values of the Father, holiness, the battles that the Father is against sin, we get drawn into that and there's an inner drive in his children.

And you get that in those other texts as well. He chose us to be holy and blameless in his sight. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure.

[23:43] And in some ways that's a duty, but in other ways it's a privilege. It's a privilege to bear the family likeness. And the family likeness is of, we would say, being like Jesus.

It's a privilege to have that calling, to have that road ahead of us, to be involved in our Father's business. It involves us in warfare, putting to death the sins of the body, the misdeeds of the body, but that's part of what it is to be in God's family.

That was the second thing, which was, what was the second thing? The undeniable inner drive. Third thing, the instinctive cry. Chapter 8, verse 15.

You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the spirit of sonship, and by him we cry, Abba, Father. The same thing in Galatians, the spirit who calls out, Abba, Father.

The instinct a child has to say, Mama, Dada, Appa, Abba. When we become children of God, we cry out, Abba, Father.

[25:04] It's almost the first thing a child does, like a newborn baby will just cry, but a newborn Christian will cry out, Abba, Father. The first breath.

It's a prayer, really, isn't it? To look up to God and say, Father. That's what it is to be a Christian. If you like, it's a cry of dependence.

Father. Father. Heavenly Father. Here I am today. I've got this meeting to do. I've got these people to see. I've got this on my to-do list.

I need to buy some food. You can see all this. Heavenly Father says, yes, of course, I can see that. You can depend on me.

Well, give us this day our daily bread. Interestingly, that God often does that even when we forget to ask him. That's a very good father, isn't it? For protection.

[26:03] The father protects his children. That's an instinct of a father. For provision. For guidance. And even for discipline. A good father won't let his child develop harmful habits, unhelpful habits.

Father will discipline his child. And our father does that for us. And in prayer, as the catechism says, he hears our prayer.

His ears are open to our prayer. His eyes are upon the righteous. His ears are open to our prayer. We cry, Abba, father. And the father doesn't say, oh, I'm not bothered with you lot.

Too busy. He listens to our cry. That's a helpful thing to know, isn't it? He doesn't always do what we tell him to do. But he has our best good at heart and he hears our cry.

Christians have the privilege of praying to their heavenly father. Heavenly father, help me today. In the name of Jesus, I pray.

[27:16] Amen. It's a very simple prayer, but that's what it is to be a Christian. To call on the heavenly father. It's a simple dependence.

It's a loving relationship. The child would not dream that its father or mother would hurt or harm or withhold, but protect and nurture and bless with generous free gifts.

I don't know whether your mum and dad ever made you pay for your food at home, did they? You were growing up. You know, four-year-old, you know, whatever it is, chicken nuggets and chips. That'll be 75p.

I'm giving you a discount. It's the parental pleasure to provide for children generously.

We want to do that and our heavenly father loves to give to us. And when we look up to the father, the mode of relating to him is fundamentally based on the father's love.

[28:26] How deep the father's love for us. Behold, what manner of love the father has bestowed on us that we should be all children of God. The Puritan John Owen had a whole books and chapters on this and saying that our communion with the father is chiefly a matter of communion in love.

That's the chief business that goes between him and us, us and him. His love for us which we, in a very faltering and unworthy way, we seek to offer back to him.

The cry to the father. Number four, the double certainty. Being certain that we belong to the family is not a difficult task that is set for us.

It is not an elusive and distant possibility that very few Christians tame to. It is a simple given.

If you're a Christian, God is your father. You can know it and depend on it and count on it. There's a certainty that belongs to every Christian.

[29:45] And our passage in Romans 8 gives two witnesses together to this. It's in verse 16. The spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

The spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. So there's two things. With our spirit. So our spirit, that's us.

That's our consciousness. That's us. And we think and reflect and notice and we notice since I've become a Christian I have faith in God.

I trust his word. I find myself praying. I find myself liking things that I didn't like before and not liking things that I used to like. Something's happened to me. I notice this.

I notice my life is changing. And I say, do you know, I think God has made me a Christian. I can hardly believe it but I think God's made me a Christian. That's our spirit saying that and the spirit testifies with our spirit and he speaks within us and he says, you are correct.

[30:54] You have you have reasoned correctly. It does apply to you. You see yourself believing. The promises say that. You are correct in saying this is the action of a born again person.

Your life has changed. You are correctly assessing that. You are and the spirit whispers to the people of God. Yes, you're a Christian. You're a child of God.

And sometimes we call this assurance or we could say certainty or an inner sense that I can call God my father. It's not a big sort of achievement.

It just is. That's what Christians have. And what a wonderful thing to have. This is the Puritan Thomas Brooks giving ten advantages of being certain that God is your father.

I think he probably couldn't have done more but he's his ten. Number one, it produces heaven on earth. To be certain of the love of the father is the nearest you get to heaven on earth.

[31:56] Two, it sweetens life changes. Life's full of changes but knowing that God is our heavenly father gives us a basis to understand and to sweeten something that might otherwise be bitter.

Three, it keeps the heart from desiring the world because we can be heavenly minded and find pleasure in thinking about God and our relationship with him and we don't have to find our pleasure

in the things of this world.

It assists communion with God. So if we know that the person who's listening to us loves us, it assists our communion with God. Number five, it preserves from back sliding.

It's very easy to lose the track and go back but knowing that God is our father and communing with God keeps us from back sliding. Number six, it produces holy boldness to be strong in faith and strong in the things of God.

Number seven, it prepares us for death. That's a good one, isn't it? Unless the Lord Jesus comes first, we're all going to get old and die.

[33:05] Might not even get old, might just die. And to be certain about what that means and where we're going, what a wonderful thing, what a necessary thing.

It prepares us for death. Number eight, it makes mercies taste like mercies. It's a very nice Puritan expression, isn't it? It makes us glad of God's mercy to us.

Number nine, it gives vigor in Christian service and number ten, it leads to the soul's enjoyment of Christ. Well, Thomas Watson has at least a paragraph on all of those and I've just mentioned them as a list.

But it's a good list, isn't it? It's a good list. Yes? Sure? Yeah, it's a good list. Number five, the cosmic future. So let's come back to this gender-specific thing.

Why are we talking about a son rather than a child or a daughter? Now, some places it does talk about child. In other places it talks about sons and daughters, but quite often it uses the words son and sonship.

[34:08] And I think the angle is that in their context when you talk about son and sonship you're talking about inheritance. Perhaps different in our context, but in that context the son would inherit.

And that's what it says in the 17th verse of chapter 8 that we're looking at. 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.

So it's looking forward to inheriting. You get the same thing in Galatians. If you're no longer a slave but a son and since you're a son God has made you also an heir.

1 John says what we will be has not yet been made known but we know that when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is. So he's talking about something in the future. How many people here have inherited anything in living memory?

Hands up please inherited anything? Okay. Good. Thank you. I might have inherited your mum's brown eyes. I wasn't talking about that. Financially, property, maybe your bank balance is different because you have inherited riches from your mum or dad or whoever it was.

[35:44] Enriched. You didn't love your mum and dad just because when they died you would get their riches but it is a fact that they wanted you to inherit whatever it is, hopefully something nice.

But this is certainly true in being a child of God. It talks about riches, positives that God has in store for the future which we don't yet have.

It puts it in different ways. The one John says, it talks about what we will be has not yet been made known. In Romans 8.22 it says this remarkable thing, we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grew inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. He says, well actually you haven't got sonship yet, in a sense, because it's only when your body becomes glorious and shines like the sun in the kingdom of the father, then you will understand what sonship really is.

The moment we're paddling on the edges of it and then we'll just dive right in to the depths of it and that's what we're in a sense waiting for. It's really important that we realise as Christians that the centre of gravity of the Christian life, the thing that makes it all worthwhile is not what we've got now.

[37:24] What we've got now is always going to be unsatisfactory and tentative and interim. It's where it's headed that makes it all worthwhile. What makes it worthwhile?

Then we will receive our adoption, he says, the redemption of our bodies. the full deal of sonship only happens in the future when we inherit everything, when we are co-heirs with Christ.

Now, what does that mean? Do you know, I can't tell you. I don't think it tells us. It says what we will be has not yet been made known. We could speculate, we could guess, use our imaginations, but we don't have the hard data, apart from the fact that Jesus has risen from the dead.

But the glory that is yet to come, we haven't seen it yet, but he says it will be worth it. It will be terrifically worth it. It will be worth it. Have you done something where people say it will be worth it in the end?

Studying for something, that's really hard work, but it will be worth it in the end? Or doing a long walk and your feet are getting sore, are people worth it in the end?

[38:43] And God says, here you groan inwardly, lots of things that are unsatisfactory, we're not to be put off by them because it will be worth it in the end. We groan inwardly, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons.

The cosmic future. Now, kids can be very cute, so I go back to that, I think he's cute. But, it would be really odd if a parent wanted their child to remain two and a half forever.

Yeah? It would be really odd if you said, I love my son at the age of two and a half, just like him to stay like that forever. I look back on our kids when they were two and three and four and five, I forget the bits where he says, he's strangling me, are we there yet?

I forget all that. Just think how wonderful it was when they sat nicely and enjoyed ice creams and we played on the beach. But I wouldn't want to say, I wish we were back there, I wish they were still two and a half and three.

The point of having children is that they grow up to be full grown responsible, capable, free, mature people. And our father says there is a fullness to come and that's what we're heading for.

[40:17] That's what we're heading for. In the world to come, in the resurrection, we don't know what it will be like but it will be glorious, it will be worth it. Important that we have that perspective.

I'll just wind it back a little bit. When we've lost somebody, when we've been bereaved, it's a loss for us, yes, but it's not a loss for them. They're in the arms of the Lord Jesus Christ.

They've got ahead of us, as it were, on this journey to the final resurrection and to the glory. We need to see it from that point of view.

We'll see them, they'll be there, they won't miss out, we won't miss out, we'll be together in the final glory, the cosmic future. So what is a Christian?

And the answer I tried to give this morning is a Christian is someone who can call God father, a child of God, a son, a son or daughter of the living God. And I said I was going to try to put it across so that Christians would be glad that they're Christians.

[41:25] and I don't know, it's a little bit sleepy this morning, but I hope those points make us glad if we're Christians that we are Christians, have had any success.

Did you hear anything that made you say yeah I am glad I'm a Christian? Yeah, because it's a fantastic theme. I would have done an awful job if I'd spoken for all this length of time and you were just waiting for me to finish and I didn't hear anything that made me pleased at all because it's wonderful that we can call God our father.

And people who are not Christians, if there is somebody like that here, I hope I've painted a picture that makes you think I'd love to be a Christian.

How desirable to be able to cry out with this instinctive cry, how desirable to have this inner drive, how desirable to have this certainty, how desirable to have this cosmic future.

What a wonderful thing, I would like that and I say well go for it then. Realise that you're not already there and why don't you pray father, can I call you father, father can you bring me please into this enviable position of being a son or daughter of the living God.

[42:46] Why not do that? Well I'll leave that with you. We're going to sing a song together now, number 687. Let's tell you a six hundred eighty-seven. tell you a six hundred eighty-seven. a six hundred eighty-seven.

tell you a six hundred Let's