

From Outsider to Insider
ROMANS 8:1-17

The writer James Jones once wrote a story of an orphan boy who lived in an orphanage in a country town in England. While his carers did their best, the boy always felt an outsider, never belonging. On one of his many solitary walks through the town, the boy saw a father and son playing cricket in a park. As he watched, he not only saw an impromptu game of cricket but also the giving and receiving of love, a family, belonging. All of which was foreign to him.

Just as he was about to walk away, the father saw him. He suggested to his own son that the boy might like to be invited to join the game. And so he accepted the invitation and became part of the game. He belonged.

This is an imperfect but evocative analogy of how God the father through his son invites us to belong to his own family. How we want us to move from being orphaned onlookers to loved children. It is one theme of the passage we look at today: ROMANS 8:1-17. It begins a four week series on this most encouraging and foundational chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. I want to highlight certain themes which I trust give us a taste of what gladness there is such a change of status.

v.1-3 tell us there is no condemnation for those who have personal trust in Jesus and what he has accomplished for them in his life, death and resurrection. To be in Christ is to be so connected to him by this trust that our destiny and his destiny are somehow merged. His status with God becomes our status with God. If we trust in what Jesus has done for us rather than on what we might do for God, then we are seen to be in Jesus. Since Jesus is not condemned by God nor are we. Jesus took all that on himself on the cross and his offering was acceptable to God. We share in that acceptance. Only trust in his perfect goodness and not our own rather mixed goodness will get us right with God.

So why is it that I meet so many Christians who attend evangelical churches who feel utterly condemned. Why does coming to church sometimes result in such people feeling terribly about themselves rather than feeling so thankful to God? Two comments. One is to distinguish between conviction and condemnation. It is right to confront our shortcomings and mourn them, to sense the Spirit of God tapping us on the shoulder and urging us to clear the air with God. This is conviction. It is healthy in that it points us to the mercy of God. We might feel bad but not in some hopeless way. We face our failures and are assured of forgiveness and God's ongoing love for us.

In contrast, condemnation is a heavy burden that can't be shifted. It buries us in a pit of hopelessness. It focuses on how bad we are or how badly we feel about ourselves. It doesn't lift our eyes to the grace of God, the outstretched arms of Jesus offering us mercy and a fresh start. It has us focus on ourselves. It is a ploy of Satan not a ministry of the Spirit of God. As such it is a lie. If I am in Jesus, I am not condemned. My past, present, and future wrongdoing is dealt with by Jesus' once and for all work on the cross.

The second comment is that perhaps we who preach and teach and lead have not always got the balance right. In our rightful desire not to ignore human sin and God's righteous wrath against it, we dare not bury the mercy and love of God beneath such warning. True, we have all sinned. But this is not the bottom line. This is not the last word. The bottom line, the last word, is the love of God for his imperfect creations, a love expressed supremely in Jesus offering us reconciliation to him. God loves us, delights in us, accepts us. All else is to be placed in this context.

So there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. There is also no captivity to sin or human shortcomings. v.5-11 tell us that we have been set free from captivity to our disobedient ways. There are basically two ways to live. One is driven by natural egocentricity. We do our own thing independently of God. The other way is to be led by God's Spirit, to go his way. Paul tells us that if we are in Christ, we have the Spirit of God. And if we have him, our

tendency to go our own way is challenged by his urging us to God's way.

We can all recognise this might be true in principle but not always true in practice. We who have the Spirit don't always follow his leading. All through this chapter we have this tension between the now and the not yet. We have a taste of heaven, we are set free to obey God. And yet because it is only a taste, we tend to lapse into old ways. Freed as we are from the penalty of sin, we are not in practice free of its power over us. To use a rough analogy, it is as if imperfect human beings are locked in a prison cell of rebellion against God. We come to Jesus and in doing so the door of our cell is unlocked. But since we still live in this in-between time we sometimes languish in our cell and refuse to enjoy the offered freedom. Our captivity is self-imposed.

So there is no condemnation, and in principle no captivity for those belonging to God through trust in Jesus. Vv.14-17 go on to tell us there is no abandonment either. In case the terms condemnation and captivity seem impersonal, we see now that they result in adoption into God's family. What kept us from God's family has been removed: the guilt of our failure to please a holy God. Now we can call God our dearest father. Not all can do this: we might be all God's creation but are not all God's children. Only Jesus makes that possible.

True, we may not always please God once in his family: remember we only have a taste of heaven, we still do battle with our old way of life and thinking. But we are still in his family. My children might disobey me or displease me but they are still my loved children. My imperfect obedience to God does not disqualify me from his family. What qualifies me is my trust in what Jesus has done for me in ending my former estrangement. What makes it all possible in the first place is that God made me for relationship with him and his love would not rest till it found a way to restore that relationship. So I am an adopted child of God not due to my merits but due to God's mercy. And this is no begrudging adoption, no cold charity. I am adopted into a close personal relationship, expressed in that

term "Abba Father". Paul wants to rescue my standing with God from being a mere legal statement and add to it something warmly personal. Of course we are not to trivialise God or begin to see him as our best mate. He remains a holy, utterly "other" God. But he is personal and he loves us to bits.

If we are not experiencing this then something has gone wrong. True, feelings aren't everything, but nor are they nothing. True, we can't live on mountain tops of emotional experiences all our days, but nor need we live in grey valleys all the time. Any loving relationship entails some objective commitment to one another but also warmth of feeling.

The key here is the Holy Spirit. If he is the one who prompts us to recall our adoption, and who invites us to address God in deeply personal terms, then it follows that if we squash or quench the Spirit we will not enjoy adoption as we ought. If I tame or cage the Spirit of God by not following the ways of Jesus then I won't experience that loving family relationship. Recall that wayward children or harsh parents mean the family experience is affected even if the family is still legally a family. The real key, then, to enjoyment of relationship with our dearest Father is following Jesus at the promptings of the Spirit. No amount of conferences, sermons, special experiences, can provide what loving and glad obedience can provide.

None of us needs be an outsider when it comes to God's family. God himself invites us in by means of Jesus. Once in, the Spirit is the one who is eager to point out to us just what a privilege and pleasure it is. No condemnation, only gracious acceptance. An invitation to live a new life. An opportunity to call the God of the universe "Father". Which in effect is the Christian name for God.