

Adult Teaching Resources

December 27, 2020



Christmas Letters

2 Peter 3:1-15a (RCL 3:8-15)—“Patience and Peace”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24—“A Sanctified Season”

Romans 16:25-27—“A Christmas Benediction”

Galatians 4:4-7—“Children of the Child”

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Find links and videos related to this lesson.

“Children of the Child”

Galatians 4:4-7

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Key Text

Galatians 4:4-5—“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”

Opening

After everyone arrives, have your large group form smaller groups of 3-4. After everyone is settled, share with everyone what our Lesson Writer says about male-centric language and the Bible:

“Many writers now avoid male-centric language for God, acknowledging that the great God of the universe is far beyond any human conception of gender. In the biblical texts, however, there is no getting around the common depiction of God as a father figure.

This derives from the limitations of human language and the realities of ancient culture. The authors of the Bible lived in a largely patriarchal world in which men tended to hold greater power, so it was only natural for them to describe God with masculine pronouns. God is occasionally described in maternal terms, but the feminine imagery is clearly secondary.”

In the smaller groups, ask each person to share how they address and think about God.

Do they use more masculine pronouns?

Do they use more feminine pronouns?

Do they use gender-neutral pronouns?

Where did they learn to use the language they use?

Why do they use the language they use?

As small groups has this conversation, encourage everyone to listen with respect to each other. More than likely 4 people will not all use the same pronouns to address and think about God. That is okay.

Give each group time to have some conversation before moving to the Bible.

Reading the Bible

What was the “time” that had come? (the fullness of time)

What did God do in that time? (sent his Son)

How was God’s son born? (born of a woman, born under the law)

Why was God’s son born? (in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children)

What did God do because we are children? (God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts)

What was the cry? (Abba! Father!)

What are we? (no longer a slave but a child, if a child then also an heir, through God)

Making Connections

Jesus appropriately calls God, “Father.” If you were in Jesus’ shoes, what would you call God? Is “Father” enough? Why do you say that?

What is the ideal relationship between parent and child? How would you describe Jesus’ relationship with his mother? How would you describe Jesus’ relationship with his Father?

What has been your experience with adoption? How has that affected the way you relate to others?

When you were younger, did you ever want someone else to adopt you (even in jest)? What were you looking for that your current situation couldn’t provide? How would your life have been different if you were actually adopted by that person/family?

What have you inherited? Were you expecting to be named as an heir? How did that moment affect you?

When is inheritance a good thing? When is inheritance not so good?

Our Lesson Writer says, “The process that began with Christ’s incarnation set in motion the redeeming work of bringing us fully into the family of God.” What does it mean to you that we are being brought fully into the family of God? What does that look like?

How should a child relate to a parent? How should a parent relate to a child? What does God expect from us? What should we expect from God?

How do you describe God? How do you describe your relationship with God? Do you consider your relationship with God to be a healthy one? What can you do to improve your relationship with God?

So What?

Remaining in the large group, end this session and this (challenging) year with a conversation around hope. As you think about this year, this season of Advent, the celebration of Christmas, and the promise of divine adoption, ask everyone to consider this question:

What do we inherit as adopted children of God?

Give everyone time to think and then open the floor for conversation and discussion. As needed, move to the board and record answers for everyone to see.

Celebrate the life we have in Christ and the adoption as God's beloved children. As much as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we also celebrate God's unending love for us.

The Challenge

This week, as you end the year 2020, thank God for getting through a year unlike any other. Thank God for the love and grace given every day and the adoption and inheritance we receive.

Prayer

Loving God, this has been a year. Thank you for walking with us every step of the way. Thank you for your love and grace that sustained us when things seemed dark. Help us to hold on to you even more in the next year so that we can live into the children you desire. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Getting personal—The intensely personal way in which Jesus spoke of God was troublesome for the religious establishment of his day. Early Judaism thought of God as far too high and remote to be addressed in such personal terms: even the name “God” was considered too holy for human lips. Even today, many observant Jews commonly refer to God with circumlocutions such as “the Name” or “the Holy One, blessed be he.” As with other common notions about God, however, Jesus turned tradition upside down, daring to call God “Abba.”

Can God be mother?—The lesson notes point to Jesus’ habit of addressing God as “Father.” Is it necessary for us to also think of God as Father only, or should believers be free to address God as “Mother,” “Divine Parent,” or a comparable title if they are more comfortable doing so?

Born of, born under—Readers should be aware that Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians before any of the gospels were written. Paul rarely speaks of personal details from Jesus’ life, and we don’t know how much he knew. Matthew and Luke preserved different birth narratives, but we don’t know what traditions about Jesus’ birth Paul may have heard. Today’s text includes the closest thing we have to his version of a birth story.

Paul says two things about Jesus’ birth. First, he was “born of a woman” – that is, he was human as we are. Job described mortals as being “born of woman” (Job 14:1). Jesus himself used the phrase, saying “among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11, par. Luke 7:28).

The second thing is that Jesus was “born under the law.” This suggests that Jesus was born into the covenant community that was bound by the Jewish law, though it could also reference that Jesus was born under Roman law – and would also die under it.

Though Jesus had no sin, he identified with those who were sinners under the law. In the previous chapter, Paul had argued that “the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (3:22, cf. Rom. 8:14-17).

Adoption language—The language of adoption was not unique to Christianity. It was also commonly employed in other first century religions, particularly the “mystery religions” that were popular throughout the Roman Empire. Persons who joined such faiths went through elaborate rituals designed to indicate their “adoption” by the gods.

Imagining adoption—As an exercise, imagine what it would be like to be an orphaned or deserted child. I once spent a year teaching in a school operated by an orphanage. Most of the children there had one or more biological parents who either did not want them or were not capable of caring for them properly. The children typically carried burdens of anger and grief that they would be put in such a situation. How do you think it would feel to live as a child

Digging Deeper *continued*

without the security of having someone to call mother or father and knowing they are part of a family?

The Spirit of the Son—The expression “Spirit of his Son,” found in v. 6, occurs only here in scripture. More commonly, the Bible speaks of the “Spirit of God” (Matt. 12:28; Rom. 8:9, 14; 15:19; 1 Cor. 2:11; 7:40; 12:3; Eph. 4:30; Phil. 3:3, 1 Pet. 4:14; 1 John 4:2), though “Spirit of Christ” is also found (Rom. 8:9, 1 Pet. 1:11). Paul’s intention in using the expression “Spirit of his Son” emphasizes the present reality of Christ in the life of the believer, the Son of God who empowered others to become children of God.

You have been adopted—If we were to read vv. 6-7 aloud, it would be good to emphasize the *you*: “And because *you* are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So *you* are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”

It is helpful to remember the context of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. He had visited the largely Gentile area and established a church of eager believers. After Paul left, however, other Christian preachers arrived, insisting that faith in Christ was not enough, but that Gentile believers must also submit to circumcision (if male) and observe other aspects of the Jewish law if they wanted to be truly accepted by God. A number of the Galatian believers apparently accepted the teaching of the “Judaizers.”

Paul was livid when he learned this, and it shows in his letter to the Galatians. Several times, he took them to task for believing those who came after him and not trusting that the gospel of grace he had preached was sufficient (see 1:6-9; 3:1-5; 4:12-15, 17; 5:2-4, 7; 6:12-15). Indeed, in the very next few verses beyond our text, Paul bemoans how many had allowed themselves to become enslaved to the law and the obligations of observing holy days that were not requirements of the Christian faith.

When he declared the advent of God’s grace through Christ and the adoption of believers as children, he wanted it known that he was talking to them, to the Gentiles of Galatia: “And because *you* are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So *you* are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”

The grace of God they had learned from Paul was enough. They did not need to be circumcised or to observe Passover in order to gain acceptance: they had been fully adopted into the family.

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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Can Christians alone be called “God’s children”?

Some years ago, after speaking at a youth conference, I was taken to task by a pastor who disagreed with my reference to all people as the children of God. I had played an audio clip from a song called “Bui Doi,” from the musical “Miss Saigon.” In the song, a former soldier who had founded an orphanage sang of the many children sired by American servicemen in Vietnam, then left behind. The Amerasian children were ostracized and often left to fend for themselves. They were called “*bui doi*,” a Vietnamese term that literally means “dust of life” and came to be used of homeless children or young people who wandered the streets.

My intention was to speak of how God as Creator loves all the people of the earth, and how Christ-followers should love all of God’s children, too. My critic insisted that it was not appropriate to describe any non-Christian as a child of God. He based his view on texts such as Gal. 4:4-7 and Rom. 8:14-17, which speak of persons who have been “adopted” by God and blessed by the Spirit so that we can claim to be children of God and joint heirs with Christ.

In one sense, the difference is based on semantics. I would argue that if we speak of God as Creator of all things, then all persons, as God’s creations, could be called children of God. Clearly, Paul does speak of persons who were bound by the law becoming “adopted” by God and thus brought into a special relationship as heirs, but that does not negate the idea that every person is a part of God’s creation.

Who are we, after all, to put limits on the extent of God’s family? John tells us that Jesus once said “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:6). Whatever this verse means – a subject of much debate – it clearly suggests that God’s family is larger than we know.

There is a sense, surely, in which those who have actively trusted in Christ may have a deeper relationship as God’s adopted and Spirit-blessed children than those who do not know Christ. Even so, when we look into the eyes of any person of any age in any part of the world, how could we deny that he or she was made in the image of God, and thus could be called a child of God?