



The movie *Blood Diamond* depicts the world of “conflict diamonds” during the turmoil of Sierra Leone’s civil war in 1999. A fisherman from the Mende tribe and a mercenary-turned-smuggler are on a quest to find a rare pink diamond, each hoping it will change his life. Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou) have finally found the site where the diamond is buried. Solomon’s son, Dia, is with them. Dia was once kidnapped and forced into being a child soldier. As Solomon picks the diamond out of the hole, Danny looks up and sees Dia pointing a gun at him. Solomon, too, looks up in surprise.

“Dia, what are you doing?” Solomon asks. “Look at me. What are you doing? You are Dia Vandy. Of the proud Mende tribe.” Dia points the gun at his father. “You are a good boy who loves soccer and school.”

He walks up to Dia. “Your mother loves you so much. She waits by the fire making plantains and red palm oil stew with your sister N’Yanda and the new baby.” Tears stream down the father’s cheeks. “The cows wait for you. And Babu, the wild dog who minds no one but you.”

Tears are now streaming down Dia’s cheeks, too. Solomon continues: “I know they made you do bad things, but you are not a bad boy. I am your father, who loves you. And you will come home with me and be my son again.” Dia puts the gun down, and Solomon hugs him.

That’s a powerful scene about identity. It reminds us that how we perceive and define our identity is not only fundamental to who we are but also to how we live our lives.

We’re studying Paul’s letter to the Galatians where he’s been hammering home the truth that we’re free in Christ. We’re free from the law, we’re free from religion, we’re free from self-effort. None of these things can make us acceptable to God. Instead, God has acted through Jesus to make us acceptable to him. Instead of us trying to reach up to God, he’s reached down to us by sending his Son. Not only has he removed our sin but he’s given us the very righteousness of Jesus. And there is nothing we can add to that in terms of good works.

But, the fact is, we don’t always enjoy our freedom. Though we’re free, sometimes we live like slaves. We fall back into old patterns of thinking and living. We become convinced that God wants more from us; that he’s disappointed with us. We begin

to do things not out of a response of love but out of fear; a fear that if we don’t do this or that God will condemn us or at least be really ticked off.

Why don’t we enjoy our freedom? It’s because we don’t embrace our identity. Like that boy, we think of ourselves as something we’re not. This is what Paul addresses in Galatians 4.

A child is no different than a slave

“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” (verses 1–3).

In these verses Paul talks about two categories of people; two identities: a child and a slave. A child is typically immature and vulnerable and so is under the care of others. In those days it was customary for a wealthy man to name his eldest son as heir. He would then hand that son over to the care of a guardian. Throughout his childhood, that son knew he would inherit his father’s estate, but he couldn’t take possession of it until he became of age. In the meantime, he had no legal or property rights. His guardian controlled his life, telling him when to wake up, go to school, what to wear, and when to go to bed. The child had no freedom.

The second category of person Paul describes is that of a slave. In that day, a slave lived in fear of his life. He had no rights. Although quite often slaves were treated well, a master could torture, kill, shame and humiliate his slaves. A slave couldn’t represent himself in legal action. He had no freedom to choose what he wanted to do with his life.

Paul says, in effect, a child is no different than a slave. Even though the child is an heir by promise, he’s not yet so in experience. He’s still a child. He’s under guardians and managers to protect him and guide him until he becomes of age and gets his inheritance.

These two identities correspond to those who live under the law. Paul says the Jew is like a child and the law is a guardian who watches over him and controls him. He may have the promises of God but he’s still under law and so he’s like a child who has the promise of an inheritance but no freedom. So, in effect, he is like a slave. Notice he says they’re enslaved “to the elemental things of the world.” That’s another way of describing the law.

In Greek this term meant “basic principles.” It was sometimes used to refer to basic teachings like the ABCs. Paul says under the law the Jews were in elementary school learning the alphabet. Of course, they thought living under the law was like being in graduate school; Paul says it was like being in Kindergarten. Kindergarten is fun but no one wants to stay there. I have this vivid memory of the last day of Kindergarten and our teacher telling everyone that most of us would be going on to first grade but a couple of kids would “get” to stay in Kindergarten another year. She tried to make it sound like a cool thing but I think we all knew better! Paul says, “If you want to get out of Kindergarten, you have to advance beyond slavery to the ABCs.

But to do that they would have to embrace a new identity. That new identity is spelled out for us in verses 4–7.

Through Christ, we are all sons

“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” (verses 4–7).

Notice the change of identity is from a child/slave to a son. This is not new in Galatians. Last week you saw how God calls us sons. At the end of chapter 3 Paul said, *“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus”* (3:26). But here he tells us more about the spirit of sonship. What does this really mean? How do we really experience this? There are three concepts I want to give you from these verses that describe the spirit of sonship.

Worth

The first one comes from verses 4–5. It’s the idea of worth and value. When we live as sons and daughters of God we’re free to discover our immense worth to God. Sons and daughters are priceless to a parent. I’ve discovered that anew as we await our first grandchild. We haven’t met her yet but she has a name—Peyton. And we have pictures of her. And she already has a closetful of clothes and a room full of furniture. We talk about her and we pray for her all the time. Why is this? Because she’s priceless to us. Look how priceless we are as sons and daughters of God. We’re so valuable to God that he sent his Son for us. And his purpose was both to “redeem” and to “adopt.” These are two powerful pictures of our worth.

Let’s talk about redemption. Back then redemption was the way you freed a slave. How did this happen? Sometimes a slave would catch the attention of a wealthy free person and for some reason—compassion, justice, affection—the free person decided he wanted to free the slave. He would go to the temple and deposit with the priests the sum of money required for

manumission. The priests would pass on the money to the owner and then deliver an oracle declaring that the price had been paid and this slave was now free. The ex-slave who all his life was treated as nothing more than a piece of property was now viewed entirely different. He was free not just to do something but to be someone.

This is what has happened to each one of us. We were singled out for redemption. The price that was paid was the death of Christ. What’s emphasized in these verses is that the One God sent to redeem us was perfectly qualified to do so. He came “in the fullness of time.” Just like a father fixed the time when his son would receive his estate, God the Father determined the right time to send his Son. The fact that the Son was sent shows that he existed before his birth in Bethlehem. He’s God’s eternal Son; the second person of the Trinity who lived with his Father in eternity past. But he was also “born of a woman.” He was God’s Son and he was Mary’s Son; fully God and fully man. And he was “born under the law.” He submitted to all the requirements of Jewish law and he succeeded where all others failed; he perfectly fulfilled the righteousness of the law. And so, through his death, he was able to “redeem those who were under the law.” So now we’re free. That’s how you’re worth to God.

But that’s not all. There is another picture of our worth. Not only did he redeem us from slavery but he adopted us as sons. Verse 5 says, *“that we might receive the adoption as sons.”* The slave hasn’t only been freed; he’s also been adopted! I talk to couples today who adopt and almost invariably it costs a great deal of money to do so. Couples spend thousands of dollars on adoption. But I’ve never heard one couple ever complain about that. I’ve never heard a couple say, “That was just too much to spend.” Why? Because their love for that child is so great they’d pay any price. Jesus paid a steep price for your adoption papers, but he doesn’t mind, he loves you; you’re worth it to him!

All of us grow up struggling with this issue of our worth. Some of us disguise it better than others, but we all ask the questions, “Am I really significant at all? If I disappeared tomorrow, how long would it take before everything returned to normal? What do I really do that makes a difference?” So we try in various ways to prove to ourselves and others that we matter; that we’re of value. Maybe it’s because of our brains or our looks or our athletic ability or our social skills or our moral superiority, but in some way we’ve all been on a desperate hunt for self-worth. And when you live that way, you’re not free. You’ll always be fighting, scratching, competing and comparing. That’s slavery. That’s what the law does.

But the good news is God has called us sons. He’s proven our worth by redeeming us and adopting us. That’s the first way the spirit of sonship is experienced.

Intimacy

The second concept is intimacy. This is seen in v.6. Not only did God send his Son to redeem and adopt us, but he sent his Spirit so we could actually experience the intimacy of sonship in our hearts. Notice he did this for no other reason than that we're sons by status. To get the Spirit, you don't have to strive for some experience, or recite some formula, or fulfill some extra condition. You just become a son and when you become a son he sends the Spirit of His Son into your life and the Spirit cries out "Abba! Father!" "Abba" is an Aramaic word (still used). Aramaic was the language of first century Palestine and the native speech of Jesus. Abba means father in a way that combines both intimacy and reverence. The nearest equivalent in our language is "Daddy" or "Papa." This was the word children used in everyday conversation with their dads. Through the Spirit, this is how we relate to God. This is radical because nowhere in the Old Testament is God addressed this way. But Jesus always addressed God this way in his prayers. When he struggled in Gethsemane, he cried out in prayer, "*Abba, Father... everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will*" (Mark 14:36 NIV). The spirit of sonship gives us the privilege of relating to God with that kind of intimacy.

Ben Patterson writes, "When my children got old enough to wrestle with me, we played a game we called 'Jabba the Butt.' The name came from a large, disgusting evil character in the *Star Wars* trilogy called Jabba the Hutt. We change the surname for the sake of humor. I would play Jabba and roar around the room as the kids would shoot their laser guns at me and try to wrestle me to the floor. Sometimes I would get into the role too much and their little imaginations would slip into stark terror. They would feel my great strength and hear my booming voice, and Daddy would be transformed into Jabba. The game would stop, and I would hold them tenderly and remind them that I was their Daddy. The juxtaposition of great overwhelming strength and power with tender love is as hard for a child to hold as it is for an adult. My love for them was staggering when they coupled it with my power. Addressing God as Father can become electrifying, if we can put these two together in our minds: combining infinite love and tenderness with infinite holiness and power. It can become the source of our greatest seriousness and our deepest joy, that one of such might can be called Father (Abba), and that our Father can be one with such might!"

The spirit of sonship is that we can relate to God with that kind of freedom. You don't have to use stiff, formal protocols when you come to God. You don't have to be afraid you'll put your foot in your mouth, or embarrass yourself, or get sent away because you haven't lived up to his expectations. Yes, he is the God of the universe, but through his Spirit he invites you and nudges you to express yourself to him in fearless, spontaneous, uninhibited and personal language.

Hope

The Spirit of sonship is that of worth and intimacy. Let me give you the third concept--hope. You might be thinking, well I don't see that word in this passage. But look again at v.7. He says "... *you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.*" What does it mean to be an heir? It means to have an inheritance. In one sense we've "come of age" and received our inheritance as sons. But in another very real sense we're still waiting for it. Peter talked about this when he wrote, "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you...*" (1 Pt 1:3-4).

You see, God has redeemed us and adopted us as sons. He's placed his Spirit in our hearts to give us the intimacy of sonship. And as wonderful as those things are, we don't have everything yet. That's why we still deal with things like sickness and sin and death and grief. Some Christians have a theology that says, "You shouldn't have to experience any of those things now. All the benefits of heaven can be yours today. You just need to claim them by faith. Are you sick? You shouldn't be sick. Claim your healing. You don't have to wait for heaven; you can have it all now." But that's bad theology. We have a lot, but we're still waiting for a lot more. For now we experience brokenness, pain, sorrow, sin and sickness. But we live in hope. And our sonship makes it a confident and eager hope. It's not like we're worried that maybe we won't qualify to get in.

Anne Graham Lotz writes about people who want to visit her father's home in North Carolina. She says, "They drive up the long drive and come to the gate. They knock on the gate and say: 'Billy Graham, let us in. We've read your books; we've watched you on TV; we've written to you; and we want to come to your house.' And my father says: 'Depart from me, I don't know you. You're not a member of my family, and you've not made any arrangements to come.'" But then she says, "When I drive up that same driveway and knock on the gate, I say, 'Daddy, this is Anne, and I've come home.' The gate is thrown right open, and I go inside, because I'm the father's child."

That's our hope as sons and daughters of God. Heaven is God's house and he has the right to decide who comes in and who stays out. But if you're a son or daughter, how could he turn you away? That gives us a wonderful hope, that when the time comes, whether death comes as a thief in the night or as an angel of mercy after a long illness, we can be sure that at the end of the journey, we'll step right into our Father's arms and receive our inheritance.

The spirit of sonship is to know our worth in the eyes of our Father, to be intimate with him, and to have a sure hope that

we'll soon receive our full inheritance. The question is, why would anyone want to turn back to slavery? As a son, who would ever want to return to being a slave? This is what Paul couldn't figure out. Listen to what he says in verses 8–11.

Do not turn back to slavery

“However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain” (verses 8–11).

You can see here there's a real danger of not experiencing and enjoying our new identity. If this isn't a settled thing we can lose our freedom and we'll live as children and slaves. We'll go back to the ABCs. That's what he says here. He says you're in danger of turning back to “elemental things.” He even described what this looked like: “you observe days and months and seasons and years.” This refers to keeping the Jewish Sabbath, festivals and special feasts. Our legalism may not look the same as this, but it will always involve living by a kind of legislation rather than by relationship. We make our list of rules and measure our spirituality and value to God based on how we keep it. Paul says these rules are “weak and worthless.” They have no power to redeem us or change us. Why go back to that? Paul expresses his fear that all the time and trouble he's spent over these people has been wasted.

It's worth asking the question, why would we go back to that? I can think of several reasons. One reason is our need for approval from others. We want to be accepted. By the way, this is how churches become hotbeds of legalism. Certain rules must be kept in order to gain full acceptance into the community. The people who crave approval the most will fall right into line. It's the way to acceptance; the way to belonging. We have to fight that.

Another reason is that it's just easier to reduce righteousness to manageable behavior. I can make a list of outward behaviors and keep it so that I feel good about myself. If I can get God to sign off on that list that's even better. But God cares about the heart and my heart is full of all kinds of garbage and no list can change that. Only God can change that. And I have to live by faith that he will. That's harder to do.

Still another reason we fall back into a legalistic way of thinking and living is these patterns are deeply ingrained in us. It can be hard to even identify the ways we live under law because it's just so much a part of how we think. Have you ever noticed no matter how old you are when you go home to your parents you start acting like you're twelve again? In the same way, most of us keep returning to our identity as a child or slave. We want to be mature sons and daughters, but we don't know how to get there. Our heart aches for freedom, but it takes a long time. Don't worry about how long it takes. God uses all the events of our lives to reveal our sonship to us. One thing is certain: God will be faithful to his promise. And once that promise possesses your heart you'll never be the same.

Conclusion

Meanwhile, what can you do? Let me suggest one thing. It's a word found back in v.5. You probably didn't even notice it. It's the word “receive.” It says *“that we might receive the adoption as sons.”* Paul even uses a special Greek word here to convey the idea that this is not something we grab or take but something we receive. Eugene Peterson writes, “Receive is a freedom word. Take is not. To receive is to accept what the Divine largess provides us. To take is to plunder whatever is not nailed down. To receive is to do what children do in the family. To take is to do what pirates do on the high seas.”

Our sonship is not something out there that we have to take or grab; it's something that is here and we simply must receive from God. Let me give you a picture of that. In a minute we'll be celebrating the Lord's Supper. When the elements are passed to you I want you to think of yourself as receiving them from God, not taking them. As you receive them, picture yourself receiving your sonship.

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