

# Like Father, Like Son

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Psalter: 422:5–6

Scripture: John 1:1–14

Psalter: 403

Sermon Text: John 1:12–13

Psalter: 278:1, 4, 5

Psalter: 407

*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*

—John 1:12–13

There are two ways of becoming part of a family. Some children enter our lives through birth. What an amazing thing God does every time a new baby is conceived! I was so excited when I learned that my wife was pregnant with our first child. And I was very nervous when the day came for him to be born! Childbirth is hard on a mother and can be dangerous, but it is so rewarding to see a tiny newborn with his little hands and feet.

As each of our children grew, my wife and I recognized more and more of our images in each—in the shape of their eyes, the sound of their laugh, and the expressions of their personalities. They are like living reflections of us, and yet each one is unique.

The other way of becoming part of a family is by adoption. Just as birth may be full of wonder and joy, so adoption can be an amazing display of grace. Adoption is a free choice to bring a child into your home and your heart. It can be costly in home study fees, legal fees, and transportation costs, especially when adoption crosses

ethnic or national boundaries to bring together people from different backgrounds. It is amazing to see fathers and mothers adopt children to love and nurture as their own. In many cases, they adopt orphans who have lost parents either through circumstances or sinful choices. Such children had no claim on the new parents, but once adopted, they share equal rights, equal love, and equal responsibilities in the family. They may come with disabilities or sorrows, but once they become part of the family, their sorrows and joys mingle with those of all.

Each of us became a part of our family either by birth or by adoption, and each means of entering the family has its particular glory. One of the marvels of God's grace is that when God brings someone into His family, He does so both by birth and by adoption. In this way, He makes salvation a truly glorious work, for God grants His elect both divine birth and divine adoption.

John 1:12–13 teaches that *Christ grants divine adoption to all who receive Him because of divine birth*. The Son of God gives the right to be God's children to everyone who trusts Him with the faith created by God's regenerating work. At the beginning of his Gospel, John reveals to us two of the most glorious truths of our salvation and ties them together in Christ. Verse 12 focuses on *divine adoption*, the gracious grant of our Lord Jesus Christ to those who receive Him by faith. This relates to a new status granted to men. Verse 13 focuses on *divine birth*, the supernatural work of God by which fallen people receive Christ by faith. This pertains to a new nature created in men. Divine birth and divine adoption result in divine likeness—like Father, like son. So, I have three points to bring you under this theme of *Like Father, Like Son*: first, gracious adoption; second, supernatural rebirth; and third, amazing likeness.

### **The Gracious Adoption of God's Children**

John 1:12 says, according to a literal translation from the

Greek text, “But as many as received Him, He gave them authority to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.” This verse is about a distinct group in the world, the people of God. They are a contrast to the world in general and even to the majority of the chosen nation of Israel. The text does not present individuals in isolation, but as a group unified by a shared spiritual condition: notice the plurals *them* and *those* and, in verse 14, *we*. So this group stands apart from the world but stands together as the family of God. Scripture describes this people first by their right response to Christ, and second by the great benefit given to them by Christ.

*God’s People Have Received Christ by Faith*

John 1:12 says this people “received him.” The word *receive* is a common word in Greek and has no unusual significance. The key to understanding what it means is to recognize that God’s people receive a specific Person who offers Himself to us in a specific capacity. The text further explains these people are “those who believe in his name.” To believe is to trust. In the Bible, the name of the Lord is not just a label but God’s revelation of who He is. God is His name. Once we see who He is, we begin to understand what it means to trust Him. We may trust someone as our spouse, as our father, or as our accountant; but of Christ this is much more profoundly true: we trust Him according to His names, titles, works, and especially His offices.

Do you believingly receive Jesus Christ as your chief Prophet to teach you His way of salvation? Do you believingly embrace Jesus Christ as your only High Priest to sacrifice Himself for you and to intercede for and bless you? Do you believingly give allegiance to Jesus Christ as your King to govern, defend, and preserve you by His Word and Spirit? Only if you can humbly answer “Yes, by the grace of God I have received Jesus Christ as being all this for *me*” have you truly received Christ.

No aspect of the doctrine of conversion is so misunderstood today as what it means to receive Christ. Millions of people think that to receive Christ means to say a prayer asking Him to come into your heart. That is a distortion of biblical evangelism. The great tragedy is that many people have prayed such a prayer while still trusting in their own wisdom to guide them, or their own good works to make them righteous, or their own power to run their lives. They have asked Jesus into their hearts, but never trusted Him as the Christ! Their lives show their shallow commitment to holiness and the church as well as their self-righteous legalism.

Sometimes a little child gets confused in a superstore or even at church about where her father is. Recently, one of my seminary colleague's daughters, looking for a familiar form at our church, raced to me and threw her arms around my leg. But when she looked up, she soon realized I was not her father, and slunk away. That was an embarrassing and frightening experience for her. But more tragic is the person who thinks that he has gotten hold of salvation only to find that he has not thrown his arms around the real Christ. What shame and horror he will experience on Judgment Day, when God reveals that he has trusted in religious rituals, emotional experiences, or self-help schemes. He will see that his "easy-believism" was a fatal delusion. What will he say when his pretense of being a Christian falls away, and the fires of hell open at his feet to imprison him forever?

Oh, make sure to receive the true Christ! Only in receiving Christ do we become part of the family of God.

### *Christ Grants Adoption to God's People*

John 1:12 says, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name." Here the word power signifies a right or authority; Christ extends to all believers the right and honor to be God's children and His brethren. Scripture

calls this “the adoption of children” (Eph. 1:5). The benefits of trusting in Christ are many. They include justification and sanctification, of course, but also assurance of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, an increase of grace, and perseverance to the end. Yet, of all these benefits, the Holy Spirit singles out adoption for mention in verse 12, as if adoption encompassed them all. So Stephen Marshall (c. 1594–1655) wrote, “Very frequently in the Scriptures all the believers do obtain from Christ in this world and the world to come, here and to eternity, all is comprehended in this one, that they are made the children of God.”

Let us consider what this Scripture teaches us about this precious gift from God.

(1) Adoption is *the gracious grant of a new status before God*. Adoption is a gift, our text tells us, for “he gave them authority to become children of God.” As such, it is a free gift, not a commodity we can purchase, or a reward for our hard work. Samuel Willard (1640–1707) wrote, “He doth not adopt us, because we were lovely, but that we might be so. God saw as much beauty in others as in us, and that was none at all. And hence, that yet he should adopt us, is a demonstration of his inconceivable grace.”

By adoption, God grants us a new status. When we read “to them gave he power,” we should understand that the Greek word for power specifically refers to legal right or authority. Do not be confused and think that Christ gives people the ability to save themselves and make themselves into God’s children. John is not referring to the ability or strength to do something; he is speaking of a right or authorization. Calvin thus said adoption is not the gift of the power to believe, but Christ’s gift to those who already believe.

John does not say that adoption by God brings no new abilities with it—it certainly does, for our adoption is sealed with “the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5, 6). But adoption is first of

all a new legal status and relationship with God. When a husband and wife adopt a child, that adoption does not consist in providing, nurturing, educating, or disciplining him. Rather, it is the legal transaction granting him a new status as a member of the family.

It is critical that we see adoption as granting a *new* status. Many people today erroneously believe that all human beings are children of God. Protestant liberalism teaches that God is the Father of all, and all are His children. Indeed, human beings are God's offspring in the sense that they were created by Him (Acts 17:24–28). But long ago, by sin and unbelief, fallen humans cut themselves off from their Creator and from His household of faith. Thus Jesus says in John 8:42 and 44, "If God were your Father, ye would love me.... Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do."

We also read in 1 John 3:10, "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother." This refers not to a small minority of people in the world but to the entire world apart from those saved by Christ. So 1 John 5:19 says, "And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness." We are not born into this world as children of God but as children of the devil, the evil one.

John 1:12 says, "But as many as received him, he gave them authority to *become* children of God." They do not simply realize that they have always been children of God. No, they *become* children of God—with a new status and a new relation with God—only by grace.

(2) More specifically, adoption grants us the status of *being accounted the sons and heirs of God*. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 34) says, "Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God." To appreciate the richness of our adoption, we must realize that adoption is not the same thing as

justification. Justification too is the gift of a new legal status. Our sin was imputed, or counted to Christ on the cross, and His righteousness is counted to us by faith (Rom. 3:21–4:8; 2 Cor. 5:21). Justification gives us legal righteousness under God's justice.

Adoption goes even further, however. It establishes a legal relation between us and God, so that He is our Father and we are His children. Adoption is a legal and binding covenant of sonship between God and His people. This status was foreshadowed in God's covenant with Israel (Ex. 4:22; Deut. 14:1), then in God's covenant with David, when the Lord said, "I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Sam. 7:14). So Christ says of every believer, "I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (Rev. 21:7). Thus the central promise of the covenant, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people," reaches its highest point in adoption, in which the people of God are counted as sons and daughters of God with the right to count Him as their Father (Ps. 87:5, 6; 2 Cor. 6:18). Just as adoptive parents give their name to their adopted child signaling that he is now part of their family, so the Lord puts His name upon us to mark us as His own (Jer. 14:9; Rev. 3:12).

Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711) said, "From being a child of the devil to becoming a child of God, from being a child of wrath to becoming the object of God's favor, from being a child of condemnation to becoming an heir of all the promises and a possessor of all blessings, and to be exalted from the greatest misery to the highest felicity—this is something which exceeds all comprehension and all adoration."

(3) Adoption is *a gift from our Lord Jesus Christ*. When John 1:12 says, "He gave them authority to become children of God," it clearly refers to Christ as the incarnate Word. This may strike you as strange, for we normally speak of God the Father adopting us (Eph. 1:3–5; 1 John 3:1). In this, as in all things, Christ is

doing the will of the Father (John 4:34). The Father has chosen us for adoption as His children, but it is the Son who confers this gift. What a sweet thought it is to know that the Lord Jesus personally hands us our adoption papers! Augustine (354–430) observed that typically the only child of a father rejoices that he does not have to share his inheritance with anyone else. But Christ is an only Son who gladly shares His inheritance with us as His adopted brothers, takes us as His inheritance, and makes Himself ours!

Moreover, Christ is the one who confers adoption on us because He purchased it for us with His blood. Human adoption can be very expensive, especially if it involves adopting from a foreign country. Such a process can cost \$20,000 to \$30,000. Yet it was far more costly for Christ to secure our adoption: He had to descend from heaven to earth, humbling Himself to be “made of a woman, made under the law” (Phil. 2:5–8, Gal. 4:4). He redeemed us by dying under the curse of God (Gal. 3:13; 4:5). John 11:52 indicates that Christ died to “gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.” Why are we, people of many nations, gathered into God’s family? Because Christ died for us.

James Boice said that our adoption, as authorized by Christ, should give us boldness and great confidence. The same Lord Jesus who has all authority in heaven and on earth has given us authority to be the children of God. Therefore, believers have the sovereign right to claim God as their Father. Our adoption stands on the highest possible legal ground and is rooted in the greatest moral and governmental authority.

Boice told how, on one of Napoleon’s military campaigns, the Emperor let go of the reins of his horse to read something. The horse reared up. Before it could throw Napoleon off, however, a lowly corporal ran up, seized the horse’s bridle, and brought it under control. Napoleon looked at the corporal and said, “Thank you, *Captain.*”



The newly promoted soldier said, “Of what company, sir?” The emperor replied, “Of my guards.” Immediately, the man laid down his musket, ripped off his corporal stripes, and walked to the army’s headquarters.

A staff person asked him what he was doing. “I am a captain of the guards,” he answered.

“By whose authority?” a man asked.

“By the authority of the Emperor,” said the new captain—and that settled the matter!

Dear believers in Jesus Christ, you are children of the living God. If anyone—angel, devil or man—asks by whose authority you claim to be a child of God, you may respond, “By the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

How amazing it is that God would adopt His bitter enemies, children of the devil, into His own family! We should marvel at the words of 1 John 3:1, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.” And we should be awestruck at the thought that God confers this gift on us by the nail-pierced hand of His Son!

### **The Supernatural Birth of God’s Children**

Thus far, we have considered the gracious adoption of God’s children in Christ. In John 1:12, we saw that God’s people receive Christ by faith and are granted adoption by Christ. This brings us to the second half of our Scripture text. John 1:12 ends in the Greek with the phrase “to them that believe in his name.” Such persons are further described in John 1:13, literally translated, as those “who not of bloods nor of the will of flesh nor of the will of a man but of God were born.”

This verse answers a very important question: How can anyone receive Christ? How can anyone believe in Him? People tend to think that receiving Christ is easy; but John told us in verses 10–11 that the world did not know or recognize Christ, and Israel did not receive Him. There is a universal resistance in mankind against faith

in Christ. As the true Light, Christ has come into the world, but men will not come to this Light, for they hate it and love the darkness instead, because their deeds are evil (John 3:19, 20).

Who then can be saved? Matthew 19:25–26 tells us that God must do a supernatural work to convert us. It is so much a work of new creation that the Bible calls it regeneration, or being born again (John 1:13; 3:3–8; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23). Literally, it is a “genesis from above” (John 3:6). Our Lord Jesus declares, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

The first three parts of John 1:13 emphatically deny that this spiritual rebirth is produced by man. The fourth part, by contrast, affirms that it is a miracle of God.

#### *Regeneration is Not a Birth by Any Human Means*

John says that God’s believing children have been born “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man.” Some commentators say these three phrases say the same thing in three different ways: that this rebirth is not a physical birth. But that does not fully explain the meaning of the text. The three phrases refer to three distinct matters: our physical birth, our personal choices, and the choices of our forbears or leaders. Specifically, it means the following:

(1) We are not born into the kingdom of God *by physical birth*. It is not a matter of biology or genealogy. “Blood” refers to the bodily fluids involved in conception, pregnancy, and natural birth, or possibly to the bloodlines of ancestry. You are not born a Christian. No individual or group can be considered Christian by virtue of family or ethnicity. That was a crucial statement for John to make in view of Jewish national pride, but he does not end there. Whenever a particular people generally embrace the Christian faith, they might assume that their race or nation is God’s chosen people, but God’s elect were never

defined by race, says Romans 9:6–13. Since the coming of Christ, the family of God has expanded into every nation (Matt. 28:19). Family or national pride and racism have no place in biblical Christianity. No one will get to heaven based on the color of his skin, his ethnic heritage, or the correct last name.

(2) We are not born into the kingdom *by our will*, or, in the words of our Scripture, “nor of the will of the flesh.” Some scholars say “the will of the flesh” refers to sexual desire. “Flesh” can sometimes refer to the physical body, and “the will of the flesh” can refer to physical desires. If that is the meaning here, this phrase would repeat what was said before, that we are not born again by a physical birth. John’s choice of words suggests that he refers here not to the human body, but to the desires and choices of the fallen human heart.

This is confirmed by the Bible’s use of *flesh*. So John 1:14 tells us, “the Word was made flesh”—not just a body, but a fully human person with body and soul. When the Lord Jesus contrasts flesh and spirit in John 3:6 and 6:63, He is not drawing a contrast between the human body and the human spirit, but between man’s inability and the supernatural power of God the Holy Ghost. In John 8:15, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for judging after the flesh, not because they were looking at people’s bodies, but because they were thinking in a limited human manner. And in John 17:2, Christ prayed to His Father to give His Son “power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.” Christ did not merely have sovereignty over human bodies, but sovereignty over all humanity, body and soul, to save His elect. So *flesh* often refers to human nature, body and soul together, in a way that emphasizes our weakness due to the Fall.

Therefore, when John says, “not of the will of the flesh,” he means that our spiritual birth is not produced by human will, human choices, human motivations, or the inclinations of human nature, for we are radically

corrupted by sin. Jesus taught this in John 5:40, saying, “Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.” Literally, He is saying, “You are not willing to come to me.” People by nature are *unwilling* to trust in Christ. They are also *unable* to come to Christ. In John 6:44, Christ says, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.” They cannot even truly hear His Word (John 8:43). People must be born again to receive Christ because, in their fallen condition, they are unwilling and unable to trust Him. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “We are so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God” (Q. 8).

This should humble us. You cannot receive Christ by an act of your own will. Your duty is to come to Christ because you have a will and you are responsible to use it rightly, but our fallen human nature is so twisted by sin that we will not and cannot trust Christ. Do you say to yourself, “I can receive the Lord Jesus whenever I please”? You cannot take one step toward Him without the supernatural grace of God. You are so wicked, so depraved, and so hostile to God that you will never be willing or able to come to Christ unless God works a miracle in your heart. We are not born into the kingdom by our own will.

(3) We are born into the kingdom *not by the will of any other human being*, says John 1:12, “nor of the will of man.” There are two words for “man” in Greek. One is more generic, *anthropos*, meaning a human being. The other word, *andros*, is gender-specific, referring to an adult male human being, and that is the word used here. Some people think “the will of a man” refers to the choice of an adult male to beget offspring. In that case, this is just another reference to physical birth, and all three phrases have essentially the same meaning.

Again, I do not believe this interpretation is adequate because it does not square with the biblical view of God’s

sovereignty over conception and birth. The Bible repeatedly gives us examples of husbands who wanted to have children, but nothing happened until the Lord opened the wombs of their wives. Any couple who has struggled with infertility understands this well. Children are not conceived and born “of the will of a man” but by the will of God. So it seems unlikely that John would refer to natural birth as “of the will of a man” because even natural conception and birth are not under man’s control.

On the other hand, I do not agree with those who collapse this phrase into the one before it as if “not by the will of a man” is another way of saying not by “the will of the flesh.” That does not do justice to the gender-specific nuance of this word for man.

It seems best to understand that John is saying that not only your will is unable to regenerate you, but also no “father figure” in your life can do it for you by his will. The Jews would have understood this as a reference to circumcision, so this text is very important in John’s evangelization of his fellow Jews. The Jews might say, “Of course no one is part of the kingdom just by birth. Our fathers circumcised us into the covenant with Abraham. Circumcision made us sons of the kingdom.” To this John responds, “Not by the will of a man.” Today someone might say, “I know I am a Christian because my parents had me baptized.” To this Scripture responds, “Not by the will of a man.” No parent’s decision can save his children.

John Gill wrote, “The best of men, as Abraham, David, and others; who though ever so willing and desirous that their children, relations, friends, and servants should be born again, be partakers of the grace of God, and live in his sight, yet cannot effect any thing of this kind: all that they can do for them is to pray for them, give advice, and bring them under the means of grace; but all is ineffectual without a divine energy.” Only the Word and the Spirit can save us.

This is a warning to parents. We long to see our children saved. It would be so easy to grasp hold of something that would guarantee that our children go to heaven. Isn't that why some parents are so eager for their children to pray the sinner's prayer? How many of us are relying on infant baptism or Christian education, to save our little ones? But beware, dear parents. As we already saw in John 1:12, no prayer, no sacrament, and no amount of education can make your child a child of God. They only are saved who embrace Christ and His benefits with a believing heart. You cannot make your child believe. No minister can save him, and no conference, or retreat, or school can guarantee his conversion. Evangelize these children, yes, with all diligence. Pray fervently for their salvation, and then wait humbly on the Lord. Only He, the faithful covenant-keeping God, can save them.

This brings us to the last part of our text's description of the new birth.

*Regeneration Is an Act of the Sovereign Will of God*

John 1:13 declares that Christ-receiving, gospel-believing children of God, "are born of God." The essence of the gospel is that "salvation belongeth unto the LORD" (Ps. 3:8). If men are to be saved, God must do the saving. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). We must trust in the power and grace of God, who works the miracle of regeneration in His chosen ones. To be born again is to be born of God.

In his heart, every Christian knows that he is saved only because of the grace of God. From beginning to end, it is all of God. Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) wrote,

I remember sitting one day in the House of God and hearing a sermon as dry as possible and as worthless as all such sermons are, when a thought struck my mind—how came I to be converted? I prayed, thought I. Then I thought, how came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came

I to read the Scriptures? Why did I read them and what led me to them? And then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of all and that He was the Author of faith!

Concerning this rebirth, or birth from above, we may say that:

(1) It is *a birth from God the Father*. John 1:12–13 says that the “children of God” have been born “of God.” Through this passage, God the Father is distinguished from His only begotten Son. The believer’s rebirth is particularly attributed to God the Father. The First Epistle of John repeatedly speaks of being “born of God the Father” (1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). This might surprise you since Christ also speaks of being born of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5–8). The Holy Spirit is the effective agent of the second birth, but Scripture locates the source of our rebirth in the will of God the Father, who works through the Son and by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:3–7). James 1:17–18 says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” Notice that we are begotten, not of our will, but of the Father’s will. So 1 Peter 1:3 says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

God extends His fatherly love to us even before He adopts us as His children. This reminds us that our adoption is entirely of God’s initiative. It is rooted in “His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ before the world began” (2 Tim. 1:9). The Spirit freely and sovereignly effects the new birth because the Father chose us for this very thing in eternity past (Eph. 1:3–5; 1 Pet. 1:1–2). We were not yet His children at that time, but He had already set His predestinating

and adoptive love upon us and, in His time, brought our adoption to fruition.

Do you know the love of the Father? Have you been born again? If so, your rebirth was the effect of His glorious, eternal, fatherly love for you. How personal is the Father's love for you, that He would bring you out of spiritual death and raise you with Christ into spiritual life (Eph. 2:4–5)! If He chose you and loved you and regenerated you, what good things does He yet have in store for you? Exult in the love of the Father; your regeneration is a birth from God the Father.

(2) It is *a birth of God's initiative and power alone*. Surely this is part of what Scripture means when it says God's people "were born...of God." The verb is passive, indicating that God's people did not birth themselves. God did it to them.

The entire metaphor of birth takes the power and initiative out of our hands and puts it in God's. God brought us to birth, and we only realized it afterwards as we experienced our conversion from unbelief to faith in Christ. This birth was not of our will, but of God's will.

Our Lord expressed the same truth when He taught Nicodemus about being born of the Spirit. Jesus said human flesh cannot produce this birth; only the Spirit of God can do that. Then, in John 3:8, Jesus compared the Spirit to the wind. Using the words for Spirit and wind, which are the same in Greek, Jesus said, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." You cannot control the wind any more than you can control how the heavenly Father breathes upon dead sinners by His Spirit.

(3) It is *a birth of a new nature in Christ*. The word for birth implies the arrival of a new person into the world. J. C. Ryle (1816–1900) wrote,



The birth here spoken of is the new birth, or regeneration, that complete change of heart and nature which takes place in a man when he becomes a real Christian. It is a change so great that no other figure but that of birth can fully express it. It is as when a new being, with new appetites, wants, and desires is brought into the world. A person born of God is 'a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new' (2 Cor. 5:17).

Fallen human nature is diametrically opposed to God. This rebirth of God is a revolution in the heart, overthrowing natural enmity and opening the way for the truth of the gospel. It is the birth of a new nature, the conquest of a rebellious soul, and the dethroning of sin as our master. Sin still remains like an enemy hiding in the mountains, waging guerrilla warfare against our souls (1 Pet. 2:11). If we are not watchful, sin can launch devastating attacks upon us; but the King of Kings has asserted His crown rights over us, and has established His throne in our hearts.

The birth of the new nature is our re-creation in the image of God. This too is clearly implied in John 1. If God the Father begets us in a new spiritual birth, doesn't that imply that He makes us like Himself? Like father, like son, as the saying goes. Natural begetting and birth produces a child in the image of his parents (Gen. 5:3). By analogy, we expect the same to be true of spiritual begetting and birth. If you are born of God, then you bear the image of the Father, in and through Christ.

### **Putting It Together: Divine Birth unto Divine Adoption unto Divine Likeness**

*Christ grants divine adoption to all who receive Him because of their divine birth.* How wise and good God is! He has given us two gifts that reach us in our great need and lift us into the heavens: divine adoption and divine birth. By sin, our status is doomed and our nature ruined.

But, by divine adoption, God changes our status from disgraced sons of hell to honored children of heaven. He gives us a status above the angels, changing our natures from hateful children of Satan to holy children of God.

God has given us these distinct blessings in one inseparable package, for they come to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. In a sense, God's elect are "in Christ" before the world was created (Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9). There is a covenantal union between Christ and His elect from all eternity. Within that covenantal union, Christ died in their place. He intercedes for them, obtains the Spirit of regeneration for them, and writes His Word on their hearts with the Holy Spirit as promised in the New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:1–6).

The regenerated soul receives Christ by faith, and the covenantal union then becomes a vital, spiritual union through faith. Paul thus speaks in Romans 16:7 of other Christians who "were in Christ before me." In our conversion, we become united to Christ in a new, living manner. The Spirit of Christ dwells in us and we belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9). Christ Himself dwells in us (Col. 1:27) and does so in increasing measure as the Father strengthens our faith by His Spirit (Eph. 3:16–17). United to the Son of God, we are adopted as God's sons and daughters and grow more and more into the image of Christ so that He may be the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:29). In and through Christ and His work by His Spirit, we then become increasingly like our Father in heaven.

Through adoption, our Father grants us likeness to Himself. He imparts to us a filial heart and disposition that resembles His own. The Puritan Roger Drake writes, "All God's adopted children bear their Father's image, as Gideon's brethren did his (Judg. 8:18). They are like God, in holiness [and] in dignity" (Matt. 5:44–45; Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:7; 1 John 3:2–3).

"Like Father, like son" is true in another sense, too. As God's children, we have been born in our Father's

likeness. Yet we have also been born in the likeness of His Son by a living union with that Son. By grace, we increasingly become like them both. Witsius wrote that as those “born of God...the sons of God by grace bear some resemblance to him who is the Son of God by nature.... We are even transformed into his likeness, and have upon us no contemptible effulgence [or brilliant shining forth] of his most glorious holiness.”

### **Concluding Applications and Questions**

The privilege of being made like the Father through adoption places believers under responsibilities to our adopting Father that ought to transform the way we think and live. Let me just mention four of these responsibilities, and then conclude with some questions of self-examination.

(1) *Obey and imitate your Father, and love His image-bearers.* Strive to be like Him, to be holy as He is holy, to be loving as He is loving. We are to be “imitators of God” (Eph. 5:1) to show that we bear the family likeness.

We are, then, to love the Father’s image wherever we see it. We are to live as God’s children in mutual love and patience with each other, having the same Father, Elder Brother, and indwelling Spirit.

(2) *Show childlike reverence and love for your Father in everything.* Reflect habitually upon your Father’s great glory and majesty. Stand in awe of Him; render Him praise and thanksgiving in all things. Let overflowing love to your Father constrain you to employ all the means of grace, to obey His commands, and to work for Him.

(3) *Submit to your Father in every providence.* When He visits you with the rod, don’t resist or murmur. Don’t immediately respond by saying, “I am not a child of God, God is not my Father, God deals harshly with me; if He were my Father, He would have compassion on me; He

would then deliver me from this grievous and especially this sinful cross’—to speak thus does not befit the nature of an upright child,” writes Brakel. Rather, “it is fitting for a child to be quiet, to humbly submit, and to say, ‘I will bear the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against him’” (Micah 7:9).

(4) *Rejoice in being in your Father’s presence and resist every hindrance that keeps you from relishing your Father’s adopting grace.* Delight in communing with Him and avoid all murmuring against Him. In heaven, this joy will be full; our adoption will then be perfected (Rom. 8:23). We will enter into the Father’s presence where we will be everlastingly enjoying, delighting, and praising God. Let us wait and long for that, as children who eagerly anticipate our full inheritance, where the triune God shall be our all in all.

Ask yourself, then, these questions:

(1) Have I received Jesus Christ as my Prophet, Priest, and King? If so, continue to live by faith in Him alone. Colossians 2:6 says, “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him.” You will never grow beyond Christ but only deeper into Him.

(2) Have I been adopted by God as one of His dear children? Then live as a child of God, and not as an orphan. When trouble comes, lift your eyes to your heavenly Father. Be continually amazed at God’s kindness to you in adopting you as His child.

(3) Have I been born of God to become a child of God? If so, walk by the Spirit in a new and godly life. Romans 8:14 says, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God.”

(4) Ask, am I counted among the children of God? Then count them as your brothers and sisters, and love them affectionately and patiently. Be a committed and faithful church member. Care for the saints. Hear the words

of Jesus calling to His family at the foot of His cross, “Woman, behold thy son!” and “Behold thy mother!” (John 19:26–27). Look around your church at the older men and say, “These are my fathers.” View the older women and say, “These are my mothers.” Say of the younger men, “These are my brothers,” and of the younger women, “These are my sisters in all purity” (cf. 1 Tim. 5:1–2).

(5) Ask yourself, am I yet lost? Are these glorious truths not true of me as yet? Am I still separated from Christ, alienated from holy people of God, a stranger to the covenant of adoption, and dead in my sins? Then cry out to God for salvation until He makes you a child of God. You are presently far from God, but Christ can bring you near by His blood. Refuse to rest upon anything of yourself and to find any peace anywhere except with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And may God cause you to be born again unto a living hope in Christ. May Christ grant you the right to be a child of God, even today!

(6) Ask, am I truly saved and becoming increasingly like my Father in heaven? If so, then sing! If there is any right response to John 1:12–13, surely it is praise and thanksgiving and the lifting up of our hearts to the Lord. In the great congregation of God’s people, at home with your loved ones, or alone with God, sing praise to Him with grace in your heart:

O how shall I the goodness tell,  
Father, which Thou to me hast showed?  
That I, a child of wrath and hell,  
I should be called a child of God;  
Should know, should feel my sins forgiv’n,  
And taste today the joys of heav’n. Amen.