

ADOPTIVE PARENTING

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to week 5 of our class on adoption. This morning we are going to discuss adoptive parenting. A few weeks ago, many of you were in the Christian parenting class, therefore, we are going to try to highlight challenges and strategies for adoptive parenting that are fairly distinct from what we all might consider typical Christian parenting.

Next week, we will conclude with a panel discussion on adoption. If you'd like to submit a question, write one down and hand it to Ashok or me after class, or email _____ at _____. Otherwise, you can come to class next Sunday with questions in mind.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

For those of you who don't know my family or our story, allow me to introduce ourselves. My name is PJ King and I have been married to my lovely bride, Katie, since 2007. I am currently pursuing my M.Div. at Southeastern and hope to transition into vocational ministry as I approach graduation in the next year. Prior to seminary, I was a software developer, and prior to adoption, Katie worked as an R.N.

Back in 2011, three years into our marriage, we adopted our first three children from the foster system in Texas. Back then, Katie and I were 24 and 25, respectively, Vernon was 8, Brooklyn was nearly 5, and Emma was 13 months. (Yes, we are as young as we look. In fact, Vernon was born during the week of my high school graduation.) Just seven months ago, Seth was added to our family by typical means.

Some of you may want to ask, Why did you adopt so early in marriage? Why did you adopt older kids? Why did you adopt three kids at once? Allow me to answer these in short form. Katie and I had a desire and expectation to adopt prior to marriage, and perhaps, prior to even meeting. When we found ourselves three years into marriage, having never been pregnant, we felt that God had given us the opportunity to adopt sooner rather than later. We also recognized the opportunity to take on a different type of adoption than we might be able to if we had a bunch of munchkins already running around.

Our original adoptive profile welcomed up to four children, age 0-17, of any gender, race, or ethnicity because God has given us a heart for helping kids who are "un-adoptable". At age 8, Vernon crossed the threshold of being statistically un-adoptable, and by sibling association, so too did Brooklyn and even little Emma. The foster system rightly tries to keep siblings together in their new adoptive families. Unfortunately, this goal makes kids with multiple siblings all the more unlikely to be adopted. Even today, with our current struggles in adoptive parenting, Katie and I have a desire to help more "un-adoptable" children by giving them a family and a home. In our adoption training, we were told that 50% of teens in the foster system earnestly desire to be adopted—we also earnestly desire for our family to be able to be that family for some of those teens. Someday, we would love to open our home to teenagers who actively desire a permanent family. For those of you who are

considering adopting, allow me to urge you to prayerfully consider walking the difficult road of adopting the un-adoptable, including older children and large sibling groups.

If you'd like more information about the goings-on of our family, Katie maintains a blog at <http://www.adoptedbytheking.com>. In fact, today, she has posted a list of links to the adoptive parenting resources and books that we are going to discuss later in this lesson. Furthermore, we would love to talk to any of you about any aspect of our experience. Feel free to contact us using the information on your handouts.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF PARENTING

Although this short class will deal with the unique concerns of adoptive parenting, I want you to keep in mind a brief theology of Christian parenting. Specifically, adoptive Christian parenting is a subset of broader Christian parenting, so everything that applies to Christian parenting also applies to adoptive parenting. However, if you want a more detailed account of Christian parenting, you should be able to access the BFL notes for the parenting class at <http://www.fbcdurham.org>.¹

1. CHILDREN ARE HUMAN BEINGS CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

The Bible affirms a high-view of the *Sanctity of Human Life*, including the value of all children. This sanctity is rooted in the image of God that he bestowed on humanity in creation (Genesis 1:27). We believe that all human life—in the womb, in the crib, in the hospital bed—all human life has value to us and to God. Therefore, children—saints or sinners, biological or adopted—all have intrinsic value and were created to reflect the glory of God. Consider Jesus' explicit teaching on children:

Matthew 19:13-15 *Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." And he laid his hands on them and went away.*

As Christians, we must live our lives in a way that demonstrates our belief in the sanctity of human life—this must include caring for the widow, the orphan, and the destitute.

2. CHILDREN ARE A BLESSING FROM THE LORD

Not only do children have intrinsic value before God, but children are supposed to be a blessing for their parents:

Psalms 127:3-5 *Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!*

Children are a heritage from the Lord and we must not treat them as if their existence is an imposition or an inconvenience. Adoption can be difficult, but God's blessings accompany children. However, while some of those blessings will be discernible in our lifetimes, others will be treasures stored up in heaven, which will not be realized until our next life.

¹<http://www.fbcdurham.org/journeying/bible-for-life/bfl-class-notes/christian-parenting/>

3. CHILDREN HAVE FALLEN NATURES

Those of you who are parents know this is true. We don't have to teach our children to bite and fight to get what they want: they do this by their own nature. Somehow, Christians still debate this teaching, but as G. K. Chesterton noted in *Orthodoxy*, original sin "is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved." As Proverbs 22:15 reads, "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child." We all came into this world with a sinful, rebellious nature—so did our children, so have all children. We cannot parent by merely focusing on self-esteem and positive attitudes—parents must address sin in their children head on.

4. CHRISTIAN PARENTS DO NOT GUARANTEE CHRISTIAN CHILDREN

The most important task we have as parents is to proclaim and live the gospel of Christ. Our Christian faith is not passed to our children by mere association. Adopting children into a Christian home will not auto-magically make Christian children. A child only becomes a Christian by hearing and believing the Gospel and proclaiming Christ as Lord. While much of our parenting deals with the mundane, the material needs, and training for daily living, we must also love our children in such a way as to help them work through the sin in their heart. We want to see them come to faith in Jesus and turn from their sin.

ADOPTION REQUIRES LOSS

I want to remind everyone here that adoption only happens because of some loss in the life of a child. Whether a child is adoptable because of death, abuse, neglect, or even a mother's sincere desire to give her child a "better life", all adopted children have experienced loss. The degree of loss, pain, and subsequent baggage will vary for each child, but such loss is universal in adoptions. Without loss, there would be no need for adoption.

Consider some realistic scenarios of adopted children as described in Karyn Purvis' book *The Connected Child*:

In the orphanage, baby Donnie has the crib farthest away from the nursery door. He lies in soiled diapers for hours at a time and is the last baby fed by the attendant. Left untouched and underfed, he does little but stare at the sterile walls and ceiling. The back of his head has become flattened from remaining in that position so long.

Five-year old Gloria is pretty, with wide brown eyes, a pouting mouth, and long dark hair. She catches the attention of two orphanage attendants, a male and a female ... They lure the little girl with kindness and teach her how to gratify them sexually. Gloria learns that [that] is the way to earn attention, affection, and food.

Little Rick doesn't understand why his father can turn mean sometimes. But when he does, his dad smells funny and hurts people ... Sometimes the boy hears screaming in the other room and knows that his sister is getting hurt, too, but he is too small and scared to help.

Again, all children who are eligible for adoption or foster care have experienced some kind of trauma and loss. For foster children, being removed from the home is itself a traumatic experience. In order to understand adoptive parenting, you must gain a proper perspective on the loss involved in all adoptions. Children adopted internationally likely spent time outside of a home environment in an

orphanage. Children adopted through the foster system will have lost birth parent relationships and have likely suffered severe abuse or neglect. Even children adopted domestically at birth have experienced the loss of the birth mother, which is not insignificant.

PARENTING A TRAUMATIZED CHILD

How should we parent children differently in light of their prior trauma or loss?

1. BE WILLING TO ADAPT YOUR PARENTING STYLE

When we started our adoptive adventure, we were rookie parents. However, from the beginning, we had to adapt our parenting expectations to meet the needs of the child and the system. If you are adopting or fostering a traumatized child, you must be willing to adapt in order to meet the child's needs. For example, when we were still under the rule of the foster system, our children were not allowed to receive corporal punishment. But even for each child, we have had to adapt in surprising ways. Early on we needed to be vigilant in our awareness of certain environments or actions that would trigger traumatic memories, especially for our eldest, whose childhood memories were most intact.

Not just your parenting style, but your entire family life will need to be flexible to meet the unique needs of the new children in your family. You might need to modify your disciplinary approach, you might need to turn down opportunities for external ministry, and you might need to refuse a new job or relocation. For us, we have slowly come to the realization that many of our ministry aspirations may have to be put on hold until our children are stable, older, or even graduated out of the house. The needs of our family must come first and, right now, that means providing the stability and resources they need to hopefully succeed in life.

2. BE WILLING TO SEEK AND RECEIVE HELP

We get it. All parents need help. No one is meant to parent alone, outside of a community. But adoptive and foster parents need more help than most. If you are looking into adoption, start now to look for resources and people who can help you parent your children wisely, compassionately, and practically. Furthermore, you are going to need people who are willing to help both in the day-to-day grind of life and during some exceptional times of need. Adopting children is a demanding task and requires the time and resources of more than one family. Surround yourself with people you trust, who can take care of your children when you need relief.

Prior to adopting, we found it helpful to meet with other adoptive parents and families. Since we did not know our practical route for adopting we met with those who had gone through international, domestic, and foster for their adoption. Thankfully, each of these families did their best to present us with an honest assessment of the realities of adoptive parenting. We still find ourselves turning to some of these veteran families when we need advice rooted in adoptive experience.

For those wanting to help: find out how you can help the adoptive and fostering families around you. When they bring home new children, throw adoption showers as you would throw a baby shower. Even for the families that have had their children for years, bring a meal or have a pizza delivered because they may still have a difficult family life on account of their adoption. Offer to babysit for free. To help foster families, you may have to fill out paperwork and go through a background check in order to be approved for babysitting—put forth the effort. These parents can't have an evening away from the kids without approved babysitters. Form deep relationships with adoptive parents

because adoptive parenting can be an extremely lonely experience, especially when home life is particularly difficult.

3. REALIZE THAT ATTACHMENT MAY NOT COME EASILY

Attachment is a psychological term used to describe the emotional bond that exists between parent and child. When you conceive a child, mom and baby should have eight to nine months getting used to each other before the formal introduction. At birth, a host of verbal, tactile, and hormonal factors help a child and parents attach. Unfortunately, adoptive families don't have many of these advantages. While biological attachment often comes easily, adoptive attachment is a process, for both child and parent. This doesn't mean that the eventual emotional bond will be inherently weaker, but it will be more difficult to form and will require intentional effort to develop.

Oftentimes, children adopted at an older age will have a more difficult time attaching than similar children adopted at a younger age. When you adopt a 12 year-old, you are adopting a child who has lived 12 years without you as his parent. Even if he wants you to be his parent, it will take time to change the emotional status of his relationship to you. Please note that it is much the same on the parental side. Although every adoptive parent intentionally adopts his children, the typical emotional connection, affection, and "warm-fuzzies" associated with normal attachment will not necessarily be there in the beginning. If you are an adoptive parent and do not have the type of emotional bond with your child as you would desire, please do not feel guilty! This is an unfortunately normal consequence of the loss associated with adoption.

We were taught a rule of thumb that seems accurate enough: For every year your child lived outside of your family, plan for it to take just as many years for that child to feel perfectly at home with you. For perspective, we adopted Emma at age 1 and by age 2, she was normally attached. Brooklyn was adopted at age 5 and we are praying she might attach well by age 10. Vernon was adopted at age 8, and the rule of thumb projects him to be 16 before he feels perfectly at home in our family. While it may happen sooner or later, this rule of thumb is helpful in setting realistic expectations.

SPIRITUAL BATTLES

We are probably all aware that sin manifests itself through the temptation of the world, the flesh, and the devil. To a great degree, children from tough backgrounds are at a distinct disadvantage in their battle against sin. Before we look at their world, their flesh, and the devil, let's remember the testimony of Ephesians 2:1-3:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Full stop. Unless your adopted child is already a Christian, this is their spiritual state. We all know what follows in verse 4 for those made alive in Christ, but our children do not experientially know it. Let's take some time to stop here and think about the spiritual state of children adopted from hard places.

ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE

As we mentioned above, adoption requires loss, often in traumatic form. The world these kids come from is usually broken, more so than the one we often experience. The habits, instructions, and values taught to children from hard places, left uncorrected, will prove damaging in their lives. Here's a real life example: one sibling group may be explicitly taught to steal, disrespect women, hate and fear other races, and be frequently exposed to abuses of drugs, alcohol, and pornography, to name a few. And that's just one sibling group!

SATAN'S MAD

Let me read a quote from Russ Moore's *Adopted for Life* about spiritual warfare in adoption:

The demonic powers hate babies because they hate Jesus. When they destroy "the least of these" (Matt. 25:40, 45), the most vulnerable among us, they're destroying a picture of Jesus himself, of the child delivered by the woman who crushes their head (Gen. 3:15). They know the human race is saved—and they're vanquished—by a woman giving birth (Gal. 4:4; 1 Tim. 2:15). They are grinding apart Jesus' brothers and sisters (Matt. 25:40). They are also destroying the very picture of newness of life and of dependent trust that characterizes life in the kingdom of Christ (Matt. 18:4). Children also mean blessing—a perfect target for those who seek only to kill and destroy (John 10:10).

*The demonic powers are, we must remember, rebel angels—angels created to be "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Heb. 1:14). In rebelling against this calling, the servants are in revolt against the sons, and that kind of insurrection leads to murder, as we've seen in other contexts (e.g., Mark 12:1–12). As James tells us, our lust for things we can't have leads to wars among us (James 4:2). The same is true in the heavenly places. The satanic powers want the kingdoms of the universe—and a baby uproots their reign. So they rage all the more against the babies and children who image him. As the wisdom of God announces, "All who hate me love death" (Prov. 8:36). — Russell Moore, *Adopted for Life*, (p. 64)*

Here's my own pithy statement for you to remember: Before they were adopted into a Christian family, these children belonged to Satan. He still wants to keep them and will not let them go without waging a war.

LOST IN A DELUSION

Given the world and the devil, imagine the state of the flesh of children from hard places. We already read Ephesians 2 as describing them being dead in their trespasses and sins. But when children from hard places hear and understand the gospel, *but reject it*, they are like those described in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-11, who "refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore, God sends them a strong delusion so that they may believe what is false." Insensitivity to the gospel due to the world and the devil can quickly turn into hardened hearts in the flesh. The flesh of children from hard places can be baffling: rejecting all that is good, and pursuing evil for the sake of wickedness.

But God. Let's wrap up this section on the world, the flesh, and the devil by reading the rest of Ephesians 2:4–10:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Trust in God. All parents need to trust God in their parenting. But adoptive and foster parents especially need this reminder. Parenting at-risk or special needs kids is challenging and frustrating. It can be easy to boil over or want to give up. Remember the power of the gospel to transform sinful men and women, boys and girls. God can heal bodies, repair broken hearts, and strengthen families. Even yours. Even ours.

DEALING WITH QUESTIONS

As children who have been adopted get older, many begin to ask questions about their origins and their birthparents. Some children who have been adopted don't want to investigate their history much, but others very much want to learn all they can and even get to know their birthparents if possible. Even with very young children, we need to know how much to share about a child's past and when to share it.

Some of the best advice we received about talking about adoption was to just talk about it! By this, I mean that from the time the child is a baby, talk about adoption. The very young child will not be able to understand, but the repeated words will lodge in their minds. We did this with our now three-year-old, whom we adopted when she was one. She can now discuss a short adoption narrative: "I am adopted. That means I grew in _____ tummy but now you are my Mommy and Daddy." With our older children, we have tried to answer questions when they arise. We have often been able to tell that they were thinking about adoption issues by their behavior. It took a long time to recognize this (and we are still sometimes slow!), but over time we've been able to see that a kid who is angry, rebellious, or hyperactive may very well have something on their mind.

ADOPTIVE PARENTING RESOURCES

***Adopted for Life* by Russell Moore.** This book is a fantastic overview of adoption theology. If you're just beginning to consider adoption, or if you're in the midst of it and could use some encouragement, or if your family member is adopting and you think they are crazy, start here!

***The Connected Child* by Karyn Purvis.** This is a wonderful resource for understanding and addressing numerous issues that come with parenting troubled children. Dr. Purvis is a Christian parent as well as a respected expert in her field; these two things together offer both practical solutions and an eternal, God-centered perspective.

Empowered to Connect: This is a website with lots of resources from Dr. Purvis and others.
<http://empoweredtoconnect.org/>

***Adopting the Hurt Child* by Gregory Keck and Regina Kupecky.** This book discusses a number of issues related to adopting troubled kids, including attachment, bonding, international adoption, finding effective therapy, and practical advice.

***Give Them Grace* by Elyse Fitzpatrick and Jessica Thompson.** This is not adoption-specific, but it is my favorite book on parenting! It discusses both the theology and practice of parenting from a gospel-centered perspective. I love that the practical sections include help for correcting both believing and non-believing children—in both situations, the gospel is the central message, but the implications are different for those who claim Christ and those who don't. Katie re-reads this book every couple of months for parenting encouragement and advice.