

Best Family Ever
Week 4: Best Christmas Ever Series
Galatians 4:
December 20, 2015

[Movie clip bumper video: "Christmas Vacation" family around the dining room table scene?]

Welcome/intro/vision

This is week four in our Christmas series we're calling the best Christmas ever and the idea behind this series is that all of us are doing the same things around Christmas time

And one thing that most all of us are doing around this time of year is spending time with family from all around!

And maybe for some of you, that clip from Christmas Vacation feels too eerily familiar

Today, we're talking about family! How do we meet God in the middle of THAT?!?! That's what we're talking about today

And our hope is that as we do this, you'll be able to enter into this Christmas week and time with family

with eyes wide-open to a God who is waiting for us with joy at every turn

Now as we talk about family this morning, as usual we've got a wide range of experiences and starting points

For a few of you, your family of origin and your extended family is almost all good, good, good and very good—very little negative at all

For most of us, our extended family is a mixture of some good and some bad and some years or seasons the good outweighs the bad and other years the bad outweighs the good!

And still for many of us, thinking about our families and wading into family of origin stuff or extended family relationships

is mostly marked with pain, disappointment, anger, and baggage

This past week I was taking my daughter to gymnastics and ended up talking with a couple of other gym parents about Christmas and they're extended families

And one man shared how his mother-in-law was just over-the-top demanding that she get the Christmas she wanted

which meant that everyone had to come to her and be at HER house on that day, no matter how much it inconvenienced everyone around her!

And he said,

“You know, I had great childhood memories of Christmas, but as an adult I’ve started acquiring all this Christmas baggage with my family. It’s just exhausting.”

Another parent chimed in about how her relationship with her dad was an ongoing long-term soap-opera train wreck.

He was a very unhappy man, who specialized in making others around him unhappy as well!

And so Christmas was the one time a year she saw her dad

and he used to come for most of a week but after a couple of days it was so toxic that in recent years they’ve put a cap on the number of days he can come down to 3.

And she’s spending this week bracing herself and coaching her kids and whole family on how to deal with her dad’s moods and toxicity

Merry Christmas, right?

Whether you’ve had a basically pretty good family or a deeply dysfunctional one, the truth of the matter is that none of us has had a perfect family

And so as we head into this Christmas week, and as for most of us that means more time with our imperfect families, how might God be waiting for us here?

One of the striking things about the ways the Bible is if you read it long enough, you’ll likely find a family that makes you feel much better about your own.

The Bible is full of stories and examples of family dysfunction and brokenness, really from the very beginning

And yet, even given how rawly realistic the Bible is about how family relationships can break down and go wrong

The Scriptures are emphatic about using family as one of the primary ways to understand why Jesus Christ has come and what God’s ultimate plan is and desires are for humanity

If we look at Scripture from start to finish, what we seem to see are two very important realities:

- 1. All families are broken, some are severely dysfunctional.***

2. But rather than “punt” on families and replace it with some other way of understanding ourselves or orienting our lives, **God redeems, reclaims and re-configures family around Jesus**

The Scriptures say that ***what God has done is reclaim all that family was intended to be by making it so in Jesus Christ***

And what gives you and I the power and the confidence to make this the best Christmas ever this week

even if you're getting together with family that has all kinds of baggage associated with it

Is that God has invited us into his family. We are taken care of. That is the core of the good news of Jesus and it's at the core of what we celebrate at Christmas

And it's at the core of the passage that we're going to look at this morning

If you've got a Bible you can turn with me to Galatians chapter 4.

Galatians is a letter written by Paul to a church he started in Galatia. It's one of his very first letters and it's written to a community that's got some warring factions in it

Paul has told these people that Jesus has come and offered them grace, forgiveness, and entrance into God's people and God's family without any strings attached

The only requirement is faith in Jesus, they didn't have to conform to the Jewish laws around dietary restrictions or circumcision especially

The Galatians love this, a church gets started, and then Paul leaves and continues on his missionary journeys.

But after Paul leaves some other folks come along and say,

“Jesus is nice and all, but in order to be a part of the club, in order to get in and be counted as a part of God's people, you've got to follow all these religious rules from the Jewish law”

So Paul writes this little letter, it's very short and parts of it are very dense

But this little letter over the centuries has become a place that Christians have come back to over the years to really understand and grapple with their freedom in Christ

It's been called the “Magna Carta” of the Christian life

and if you're kind of a rule-follower or the kind of person who struggles deeply with guilt and feeling burdened by all the stuff you feel like you've got to do

Then Galatians is for you!

And we're going to drop into this letter as Paul is closing out one little illustration where he's saying that before Christ came, we were like kids on a big 1st century estate

Because we were underage, we basically had the rights of slaves on 1st century Roman estate—we still had to do whatever we were told, we were UNDER THE LAW

We don't receive the full privileges of an heir to the estate until the time set by the parents, in particular in Roman culture it was the time set by the father

And at the time set by the father the child moves from a kid on the estate with no real privileges, just a bunch of waiting

to a full heir, sharing in all the rights and privileges of the parents, experiencing all the fullness of what's available on the estate

And as he closes out this great little illustration he writes this:

...when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

We have a number of adoption stories here at Chatham Community Church—some of us are adults who were adopted as children and raised by adoptive parents

And we also have a number of adults who have adopted kids that they are currently raising in their homes—several adoptions, several cross-cultural adoptions,

All of it just wonderful

we want to be a place where parents AND kids who are working out and walking out the unique challenges and blessings of adoption can do so in a safe and nurturing space

Can we be that kind of place? Can we listen and care for these folks as they navigate what for many of us is a different kind of family experience?

Can we celebrate both the parents and the kids here by letting them know we're glad they're here?

If you're an adopted kid or an adoptive parent, IF you're comfortable and only if you're comfortable, would you please bless us by raising your hands?

And one of the great traditions in the adoption community is that they not only celebrate kids birthdays

They ALSO celebrate the day they brought that child home—it's called GOTCHA day!

It's a day to celebrate the many, many hours that the parents have waited and hoped and prayed for their adoptive children

And it's also a day to communicate super-clearly to adoptive children

That they are loved, desired, that their adoptive parents went through all kinds of work to get them and to celebrate their arrival in their home

Paul here declares that at JUST THE RIGHT TIME, when the time had FULLY come, God sent his Son that he might bring you and I home to be adopted into his family

The adoption process turns to the final chapter at Jesus' birth

Then all the final and most important paper work and other work is finished on Easter morning.

And it is finally signed, sealed, and delivered when each of us stops running away from God and allow him to scoop us up and bring us home.

Christmas is the beginning of the final work on God's part to get all of us to our own date with Gotcha Day!

Paul picks up on his argument that we were all born under the law, the law was our master and we were like kids on the estate

And he uses this word 'redeem'—to redeem is to buy or buy back, to redeem is to re-give value—re-deem something of value or worth

In the Greco-Roman market place the word redeem was often used in buying and selling slaves

Throughout the Scriptures, there are promises and promises and promises and stories and stories and stories of God moving into a situation that was bleak and hopeless

And to people who are bleak and hopeless and who feel as though they and their lives have little to no value

And God steps in and RE-GIVES them and their situations value, significance, and worth.

If you're here this morning, struggling to feel as though you are valuable or struggling with looking around at your life and feeling as though everything around you is worthless and empty

And you're struggling to trust and know that there's anything of value.

Hear this good news: Jesus comes to re-deem all things. He has come to re-give value to all people, to all situations, to every single life

When the time was just right, in a such a time as this moment, Jesus is born to a people who are under the law, who have not yet experienced the full goodness of being an heir

And he buys them, buys US, back out from under that master, and adopts us into his family

Paul describes this specifically as adoption into sonship—let's unpack that a little bit

In ancient times, super-wealthy men like senators and generals would sometimes adopt other people's sons if they themselves didn't have a son to be their heir

This was all very public and normal, it happened regularly

And so Paul is riffing off of this very familiar practice in his culture and saying,
"Kind of like a super-wealthy general or senator might adopt a kid, so, too have you been adopted, brought into a new family"

And Paul describes it as being adopted into sonship. and it's not because Paul is hating on women

In the ancient Roman world, not every kid got the inheritance. Only the sons did, and especially the first-born son did

And so when Paul writes to his audience in the 1st century that they're adopted into God's family, that's great news and certainly reason to celebrate

BUT when Paul writes specifically that they've been adopted into SONSHIP, what does that mean for each of them?

They get the full inheritance!! What!?!?

"Do you mean, Paul, that I'm not only transferred from an orphan into God's family, which would be incredible

but I'm given the same status as a beloved son who's getting the full inheritance? "

This is EXACTLY what Paul is declaring to his people and that's the good news we celebrate here this morning

And there's this interplay between God the Father, the Son who comes, and our adoption as sons as well

Back up and think about this for a minute: throughout the Scriptures, God is described as having ONE Son

So in ancient practice, who was the one who was going to get all the inheritance? That one son, right?

So God ALREADY has a Son, yet he's come to adopt you and I into his family to have the standing of sons.

So if the inheritance is now going to be SHARED with other people who get the standing as sons, who's the one who's making the sacrifice to make that happen?

The Son is! The Son has agreed to share his inheritance before the Father, in the Father, all the Father's stuff, he's agreed to share with the people made in God's image, whom they both love

Now, does the Son do this reluctantly? Does he begrudgingly allow the Father to adopt in some other kids in a forced sharing situation?

NO! It's not like the Father asks the Son if it's cool to do this and then he goes and then the Father goes and makes sure it happens while the Son sulks over in the corner

The SON is the one who comes to get us! He's the one who lands here to secure this sharing of His inheritance!

He not only agrees to share his access to the Father, he puts on flesh and lays down his life in order to secure it!

***Christmas is the dizzying story of the Son who needed nothing and lacked nothing, leaving everything behind
in order to come adopt children back into God's family who were alienated from him
So that He might share his inheritance with us.***

Christmas day is the joyful celebration of the generous Son who puts on flesh on that first Christmas
which is the first decisive step in the last part of God's work to bring all people back home.

One couple here in the church adopted their girl from China about 16 years ago or so, tons of paper work, lots of money, all kinds of efforts

And finally the adoption agency said to them,

“Okay, it’s time. You’re going to fly over to China to get your child. There will be all kinds of administrative stuff to deal with once you get over there

And there’s no telling how long you’ll be over there—could be a couple days, could be a couple of weeks, could be a couple of months!”

There was all kinds of uncertainty for them as they were on that flight over to China, but once they landed, the die was cast. This was going to happen. It might be messy, might be arduous, might be a bunch more hoops to jump through

But they had a fair amount of certainty that they were not going to leave until they had their daughter that they had been waiting for in their arms

Christmas is the celebration of the day that God himself landed on this planet to get the kids he longed to adopt into his family

And there was going to be a good bit of work ahead to secure it and to finish the deal it was going to be messy, arduous, a bunch of very difficult hoops to jump through including the pain of death

But once Jesus landed, God knew without a shadow of doubt that he wasn’t going to leave without securing the redemption of his kids making a way to adopt them into his family

This passage is describing in shorthand God’s journey of putting on flesh in order to accomplish his wonderful relational goal of bringing us into his family

But it’s also describing our journey. It starts just before this by talking about us as kids who have the same experience as slaves, under the law

You know what happens to people who’s primary experience and understanding of themselves is through the lens of slavery and law?

They carry all this shame: “maybe there is something wrong with me. Maybe I am a lesser human being. Maybe I deserve to be a slave.”

There’s all kinds of psychological damage and shaping that happens to us when we’re slaves for a long time

You see it in any people group that’s been oppressed for a long period of time, this crazy self-doubt begins to creep into their psyche, the voices of shame and condemnation

See, ***GUILT is feeling bad about something you’ve done, SHAME is feeling bad about who you ARE***

And one of the things that's happened our current culture over the last 50 years or so is we're in a cultural shift

where in generations past people had a deep sense of guilt—I've done something wrong, maybe lots of things wrong

To now the primary internal negative voices are voices of shame: I AM wrong. Something's not right with me, with who I am

Some of you hear those voices very, very loudly, don't you?

If you sit still long enough, if you stop being busy for a couple of minutes, those voices for many of us aren't that far beneath the surface.

And the larger cultural obsession over social media and selfies and getting as many people to like me and approve of me

is an attempt at squashing those voices of shame and trying to prove them wrong

But the problem with that of course is it's a very, very, very temporary and a small patch over a huge, ginormous hole in our souls

Our ***culture sees this problem of SHAME and offers us the solution of FAME***: get lots of people to like you, be as popular as you can be!

God sees the problem of SHAME and offers us a much deeper, wiser, truer, answer that gets to the core of the problem: ADOPTION that leads to BELONGING

See, FAME is just a cover-up that tries to pretend that there isn't a problem. I'm not wrong, I'm fine. Nothing wrong with me. Let me just prove it by getting lots of people to like me

But first, how long does that last? A good five minutes? Then someone or something else eclipses you?

And secondly, what if that's not true? What if there IS something wrong?

What if we actually ARE alienated from the God who loves us and actually ARE falling short of the glory of God and the life he created us to live?

FAME doesn't fix that. Adoption does. Belonging to God's family does.

Coming home and entering into the culture and the ways of this house, of this family, that's what heals our shame.

Jesus RE-DEEMS us, re-gives you and me value in a permanent, eternal way that secures our place eternally before a good, good Father who loves us

We are given God's Spirit that cries out "ABBA"—which is Aramaic for what a kid would call his dad—kind of like daddy, but not in an overly-sentimental or trivial way

But it's important to note that when the Spirit falls on us, it cries out "Abba, Father!"

Think about it: when God pours out his Spirit into our hearts, what are the other things that the Spirit might shout out?

One person in my small group said, "GUILTY!"

I suggested that the Spirit might shout out the OPPOSITE: NOT GUILTY! Not guilty because of Christ

That would be great news and in Christ it would be true, but that's legal, not relational and familial.

God isn't interested in a mere legal transaction of forgiveness, not interested in a mere legal purchasing people out of slavery—he's interested in forming a new family

What's on offer this Christmas to everyone who would hear it and accept it is to be adopted as full heirs into God's perfect family.

the perfect family that we were designed to be in.

What that means for your EARTHLY family this week as you'll be spending time with them is this: the pressure is OFF of them!

they don't have to be perfect. You've already got a good family, you've got a good and perfect family—**1. OUR NEW PRIMARY FAMILY: THE BEST FAMILY EVER**

And while your family here on earth will always be one of the most formative experiences you'll ever have and it will always be significant

You don't have to have to have to have a great earthly family to be blessed with an eternally perfect one

In fact, because if we're in Christ, we're already located in a perfect family

which then frees us to come to our earthly families less needy and dependent on them to be something for us that they never could be

2. So we come to our imperfectly earthly families not empty-handed, looking for them to give us everything we need

but rather we come with hands full of blessings from our Abba, Father, ready to love and bless and serve even those people who drive us crazy

One author calls this **detachment with love**

I don't have to have YOUR approval to feel good about me, but I am delighted to love you with the love that I've been given to share with you

We can come into these relationships with great love even if they're not particularly lovable people! Our ability to love someone is not contingent on their lovable-ness

Our ability to love someone is based on the Spirit of Love that God has poured out into our hearts

This same Spirit that cries out on our behalf "Abba, Father!" is the same Spirit that gave Jesus the strength to go to the cross and die for people's sins
even for those who hate God and don't want anything to do with them

That same Spirit can give you the strength to engage with your family here on earth first from a secure, strong place
you are taken care of by your perfect Father, you are a part of his perfect family, you come to your family from a place of strength not a place of lack

We can acknowledge the pain we've experienced in the past but also receive healing and repair by our good heavenly Father.

Jesus has RE-DEEMED us, re-given us value, re-given our histories value, and has adopted us into the place of honor and prestige and blessing in his family
Our primary family is God's now, not our earthly one.

Any disappointments and hurts can be forgiven. In Christ Jesus, God has already begun the process of molding yesterday's hurts into tomorrow's glory.

Because of Christ, all things that have happened to you in the past must bless you and serve you, must become a part of your eternal beauty and character

Only God has this kind of power and authority over us, past, present, and future
to him, your yesterday is as accessible and present as this moment is
and he has the power to pick up the pain of your past and pull that thread out into today and make it beautiful

And because he's a good, good Father who is generous, joyful, and who loves to create beautiful things, he is bent on creating and making broken things beautiful—and he will one day make all things new

For some of us, the best gift we could give ourselves and our families this Christmas would be to UN-HOOK ourselves from them as our primary point of reference

To UN-HOOK from giving them too much power or authority over our lives or to shape who we are

And instead HOOK INTO the perfect family that God has given to us—which doesn't mean we disrespect or hate on or ignore them

But what it does mean is that the needs we have for a perfect family, a perfect mom or a perfect dad or brother or sister or in-law that they could never fulfill
we're not looking for that any more from them, we've found it in Christ

We're receiving the Spirit of God in our hearts, orienting our lives in God's direction,
and from that place we're looking to bless and serve others without regard to their loveliness

3. What that means for some of us: firm boundaries

God has put us in a healthy place that we might become healthy people so that we might help create strong, healthy relationships

One person I was talking to this week about their family dysfunction leading up to the Christmas extravaganza was talking about how deeply un-healthy one of their parents were

Pretty manipulative and demanding when it came to how Christmas HAD to happen

And the question in that kind of situation is simply "how does the sick person not have the power in the relationship to set the tone of the relationship?"

How does the sick person, the angry person, the addict, the passive aggressive one, the one who's trying to manipulate you into doing their thing their way

How does that person not have the power in the relationship to set the tone, the culture, to decide how you relate and how you spend time together?

The answer here is boundaries. Firm boundaries.

See, when we're kids, we don't have much choice in the matter in terms of how our family dynamics affect us

we're just kids and we just have to sort of absorb it and deal with it and sort it all out later at the counselor's office

But as adults, much of the pain we deal with is because we're still hooked into unhealthy people or relationships and making ourselves vulnerable

We give people access to our hearts or lives or schedules who have regularly proven themselves to NOT be trustworthy or safe!

So what we have to do in those cases is set in place some clear, firm boundaries

One person this past week was telling me about how the whole in-law family majored in drama.

They love drama and this person has very little interest in participating in any sort of drama

And so at one point they just decided NOT to go to their place for Christmas. It was several states away, just not going to be subject to that experience over Christmas

That's a boundary—a good and wise one

If you've got addict or an anger management issue person in your life that you need to figure out what to do with this year, you can say something like this:

“my family is going to have a substance-free Christmas. OR we're going to make my house an anger-free zone.

IF YOU WANT to participate in that kind of Christmas, you are welcome here OR we're glad to come to you.

If you can't or if at any point you've decided to violate that, I'm going to ask you to leave OR we're going to leave.”

And you can't just say it. You have to actually follow-through on it.

Now there are a couple of challenges to setting good boundaries, especially with unhealthy people and especially with unhealthy people that we've known for a long time and we've put up with their unhealthy behavior for a long time:

- 1. We're scared.** We've never put up good boundaries before, we're afraid of what it might mean, we're afraid to have that hard conversation

I totally get that, I tend towards avoiding those kinds of hard conversations myself

But here's the deal: if we're going to refuse to have the good, right, hard conversation, then we cannot complain that we're stuck

We aren't stuck, we just aren't making the kinds of choices that could change the situation.

- 2. Unhealthy people never like healthy boundaries**

People with habituated unhealthy behaviors have usually found those behaviors very helpful in getting what they want

And so when they bump up against healthy boundaries, they seldom greet those boundaries with overwhelming joy

Even if it's better for ALL parties and everyone, unhealthy people never like healthy boundaries

And so before you have the boundaries conversation, first off just know and make peace with the fact that they aren't going to like it or you!

And you just have to prayerfully pre-decide what you know to be right and refuse to get hooked into their manipulation, tears, anger, any of it

You set the healthy boundaries in a loving but direct and clear way, and then you detach from owning their response

their response is their responsibility, it is not up to you to fix them or keep them happy

A healthy adult can respect a healthy, reasonable adult boundary decision. Many unhealthy people don't have any idea of what a healthy boundary looks like

If you have someone in your family that falls into this category, then you are blessing them by showing them "look! Here's what a healthy relationship and a healthy boundary looks like!"

That's real love

Now while we're talking about this, let's not pretend that all of us in here are always the perfectly well-adjusted ones

while all the unhealthy people are ALL out there who struggle to respect other people's boundaries

Some of us here, right here, right in this very room, have this struggle.

I want to invite all of us to step back from pointing the finger at everyone else around us and ask an honest question: do I have unhealthy relational patterns?

Do I have relational patterns that are a little bit demanding, sometimes manipulative, sometimes passive-aggressive

This morning, I want to invite some of us to take the first step towards health: admit the problem

If you could admit this problem, that would likely be the best gift you could give your family this Christmas

And if you could admit it and ask for their help in figuring out what healthy boundaries look like and how to live in them and accept them even if it stings or hurts at first

This would be a wonderful gift. And here's the thing if you're willing to step back and look at yourself and if you see this tendency in yourself

The same good news of what Jesus has done to bring us into our, HIS perfect family is what frees you to not be grasping or striving with your kids or your grandkids or your siblings or spouse or parents

In Christ Jesus, you are no longer ashamed. In Christ Jesus, you are no longer a slave.

In Christ Jesus you are no longer stranded without the perfect family that you crave and long for

In Christ Jesus, you have been given the Spirit of God that cries out Abba, Father, to a perfect and loving heavenly Father.

If you can begin to grab a hold of that, what it'll do is release your clenched fist around the people around you that's sucking the life out of them
And is also, actually, sucking all the life out of you, too

This morning, Christmas week, 2015, we celebrate the good news that at just the right time, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law
to redeem and re-give value and worth to all of us who were slaves under the law

He did this, that we might receive full, honored status as full heirs, fully grafted in members of God's family.

And because of Christ, God's Spirit inside of each of us cries out "Daddy! Father!"
We are his kids

Christmas has come! God has landed! Gotcha day is straight ahead! We're going to be brought into the best family ever both now and forevermore!

And from that safe, secure, perfect place, we can bless our messed up families, and not curse them. We can love them without clinging to them to get all our needs met

We are loved, and that love in our hearts can be poured out and shared into theirs as well.

That includes detachment with love, that means healthy boundaries, that means joy and freedom as we unhook from our earthly families and transfer our hearts and lives into the hands of a good and perfect family

And our relationship with a good and perfect heavenly Father, all shared with us because of and through and in the Son who has landed, come to get us, and who we celebrate this week

Because of Christ, Christmas 2015, dysfunctional family and all, can be and is, the best Christmas ever.