

SERMON: *Adopted into the Family of God*  
SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 1:3-6; Galatians 4:3-7; Romans 8:15, 23; James 1:27  
SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black  
DATE: June 13, 2010

## **Introduction**

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Russell Moore is a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY and the author of the book *Adopted for Life*. Maggie and I, along with the Logans, went to his Adopting for Life conference in the fall. We were really blessed by the conference. Following the conference we facilitated a LBI that focused on the theology of adoption. I've been learning a lot about the topic and wanted to share with you some of what I've been learning. So this morning, while we're in between our series on Ruth and Esther, we're going to look at what the Bible says about adoption. I'd like to begin this morning by telling you a portion of Russell Moore's own story as he tells it in his book.

*"When Maria and I first walked into the orphanage, where we were led to the boys the Russian courts had picked out for us to adopt, we almost vomited in reaction to the stench and squalor of the place. The boys were in cribs, in the dark, lying in their own waste. (25)*

*"Of all the disturbing aspects of the orphanage in which we found our boys, one stands out above all the others in its horror. It was quiet. The place was filled with an eerie silence, quieter than the Library of Congress, despite the fact that there were cribs full of babies in every room. If you listened intently enough, you could hear the sound of gentle rocking-as babies rocked themselves back and forth in their beds. They didn't cry because no one responded to their cries. So they stopped. That's dehumanizing in its horror. The first moment I knew the boys received us, in some strange and preliminary way, was the moment we walked out of the room for the last time on that first trip. When little Maxim, now Benjamin, fell back in his crib and cried-the first time I ever heard him do it-it was because, for whatever reason, he seemed to think he'd be heard and, for whatever reason, he no longer liked the prospect of being alone in the dark. (52)*

*"Leaving them at the end of each day was painful, but leaving them the final day, before going home to wait for the paperwork to go through, was the hardest thing either of us had ever done. Walking out of the room to prepare for the plane ride home, Maria and I could hear Maxim calling out for us and falling down in his crib, convulsing in tears. Maria shook with tears of her own. I turned around to walk back into their room, just for a minute. I placed my hand on both of their heads and said, knowing they couldn't understand a word of English, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." I don't think I consciously intended to cite Jesus' words to his disciples in John 14:18; it just seemed like the only thing worth saying at the time. (25)*

Stories like this are not uncommon. Did you know that there are 145 million orphans in the world?<sup>1</sup> If you put all of the orphans into one country it would be the 8<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world! Every 18 seconds another child becomes an orphan<sup>2</sup> (that means that when I finish this sermon there will be almost 150 more orphans than there are right now). At any given point there are about 500,000 kids in the US foster care system.<sup>3</sup> Many children age out of the orphanages and the foster care system every year. Many of these who age out (or who are on the streets and are never in the system) end up in crime, prostitution, poverty, etc.

It is sad, and a seemingly hopeless situation. Should we do something about this crisis? And if so what? I want to argue this morning that we should do something about this – actually we are commanded to do something about this. James 1:27 says, “*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress...*” But in order to get involved in orphan care ministry in ways that honor God and are rooted in the gospel we must first have a deep understanding of our status as orphans and our own adoption into the family of God.

An orphan is someone who has been separated from their parents by death or abandonment. Or in the case of foster kids an orphan could also be someone whose parents’ parental rights have been severed.

In a spiritual sense each of us are separated from God if left in our sin, and therefore we are either spiritual orphans or we were at one time.

**Ephesians 2:12** (ESV) *We were separated...alienated...and strangers...having no hope in the world.*

Before we move on I would like to define a couple of terms I will use throughout this sermon. When I use the word “horizontal” I’ll be referring exclusively to humans and human relationships. When I use the word “vertical” I’ll be referring to humanity’s relationship to God. I also need to make one caveat before we move on. The horizontal orphan crisis is no fault of the children themselves. In the vertical orphan crisis we are at fault. We are alienated *because* of our evil behavior (Col. 1:21); we are alienated *because* of our hardness of heart (Eph. 4:18).

Should something be done about this vertical orphan crisis, since we are the ones who are responsible for being separated from God as sinners? And if so, what should be done? Let me tell you what has been done.

**Galatians 4:4-5** (ESV) *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup>to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Alliance for Orphans. For this number, an orphan is defined as a child who has lost one or both parents. This is a common definition especially in the developing world.

<sup>2</sup> Show Hope

<sup>3</sup> Cruver, Dan

There is a solution to the spiritual orphan crisis – God sent his Son Jesus so that we could be adopted into the family of God. I want to spend our time this morning looking at two broad categories of adoption. The first is the doctrine of our vertical adoption; I want to mine the depths of our adoption into God’s family. And the second is our response to our vertical adoption; I want to ask how an understanding of our vertical adoption informs our response to the horizontal orphan crisis. Another way to say this is that I want to look at the blessing and responsibility of vertical adoption.

### **Adoption into the family of God is the greatest blessing of the gospel.**

The word adoption shows up five times in Paul’s letters (Rom, 8:16, 23; 9:4; Gal, 4:5; Eph. 1:5). Paul’s usage of the term reveals two things about vertical adoption. Paul views adoption in Trinitarian terms<sup>4</sup> (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all involved in vertical adoption) and Paul sees God’s work in adoption spanning the entire sweep of redemptive history,<sup>5</sup> from before the beginning of time until the end of time. So I’d like to organize this section along these theological lines.

### **Adoption was initiated before time by the Father.**

**Ephesians 1:3-6** (NIV) *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. <sup>4</sup>For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love <sup>5</sup>he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*

Before I get into the meaning of these verses I must first say that when Paul uses the term adoption he does not have our modern American idea of adoption in mind (though there are similarities). He has the Roman idea of adoption in mind. In Roman adoption the father was the one who took the initiative. And once an adoption was finalized the bond could never be severed – a child couldn’t be sent back or taken back.

In the same way when God adopts us into his family he is the one who initiates our adoption. And he did this before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). This is what the Bible calls predestination. I’m not going to unpack the doctrine of predestination this morning – I will only say one thing. Regardless of your view of predestination, all Christian views agree that God takes the initiative in our salvation. He does this before the creation of the world; before we had any chance to do anything good or bad.

Our adoption is unconditional! God knew we were going to sin, but he chose us for adoption anyway. In a similar way, most adoptive parents know they will have a hard road ahead of them in adoption, but choose to adopt anyway. God didn’t choose us because we were a good choice. He chose us because he loves us greatly (Eph. 1:4); our adoption into his family pleased him greatly and was according to his will (Eph. 1:5).

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<sup>4</sup> Burke, Trevor

<sup>5</sup> Cruver, Dan

If salvation is not based on what we do (cf. Eph. 2:8), but on God's work, then we don't have to fear losing our salvation if we make mistakes – as we do daily. There is great assurance and security in this truth – our adoption is irrevocable!

**Adoption was accomplished in the fullness of time through the Son.**

**Galatians 4:3-7** (ESV) *In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. <sup>4</sup>But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup>to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. <sup>6</sup>And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" <sup>7</sup>So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*

God the Father initiated our adoption, but he achieved our adoption through his Son. He sent his one and only Son that we might receive adoption as sons. Think for a moment how amazing this is. God the Father already had a Son. And we know from other places in Scripture that God doesn't need anything (Acts 17:26). God didn't adopt us because he needed children. Our adoption doesn't fill up something that's lacking in God – God doesn't *gain* anything in adopting us. Instead God *gave* something to adopt us. And our adoption cost God greatly. Our adoption was not cheap and it wasn't easy. It cost him his own Son.

Jesus is the very Son of God – he is equal with God in every way. But as Philippians 2 tells us he humbled himself and was found in the likeness of man. He suffered for us and died for us so that we could become the children of God.

The Son of God became a man, so that men could become sons of God. Or another way to put it is Jesus became what he never was before (man), without ceasing to be what he always was (God) so that we could become what we never were before (sons of God), and cease to be what we always were (slaves).<sup>6</sup> Praise God!

Notice the mixing of metaphors in verse 5. The author mentions redemption and adoption. Redemption has to do with our slavery to sin. We have to understand this if we're going to understand the magnitude of our adoption. There is probably no metaphor that brings out our destitution as sinners and our need for rescue more than slavery. But notice that verse 5 doesn't just say that Christ redeemed us from slavery. It says that we were adopted into a family. We weren't just delivered out of something horrible; we were also delivered into something amazing – God's family.

This is why J.I. Packer calls the doctrine of adoption the greatest blessing of the gospel.

*Adoption is the highest blessing of the Gospel, higher even than the gift of justification because of the richer relationship with God that it involves...Justification is a forensic idea, conceived in terms of law, and viewing God as judge... Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as Father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are*

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<sup>6</sup> Burke, Trevor

*at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the father is greater. (Knowing God, 186-188).*

Our adoption was before time because the Father predestined us for adoption. Our adoption was secured in the fullness of time, when the Father sent his Son. But our adoption is also a present reality and a future hope as the Spirit confirms.

**Adoption is a present reality and a future hope as the Spirit confirms.**

**Romans 8:15-17** (ESV) *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"<sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,<sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs-- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

**Romans 8:22-24** (ESV) *For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.<sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.<sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?*

*Our adoption is a present reality.* For the sake of time I won't say much about adoption being a present reality except this: the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are adopted. We're no longer spiritual orphans, if we have put our faith in Christ. So even though there may be times that we are discouraged, we need to remember that we actually belong to the family of God. The Spirit's ministry to our spirit gives us assurance that we are children of God right now. But not only are we adopted now – our adoption will be finalized when Christ returns.

*Our adoption is a future hope.* In Roman adoption the primary purpose was not to provide children for barren women. It was to perpetuate the estate of the adopting father. That's why adopted sons in the Roman world had equal inheritance rights as biological sons. We too have equal inheritance rights with Christ, the Son of God. Verse 17 says that if we are sons, then we are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. We may be poor in this life in many ways, but when we come into our inheritance at the end of time we will be rich. We can endure much now, because we have something greater that awaits us. That's why verse 15 says we cry "Abba! Father!" through the Spirit of adoption.

This phrase, "Abba! Father!," has often been referred to as the most tender way we can address our heavenly Father; something similar to "daddy." While this phrase is not necessarily absent of tenderness, it is primarily a cry for deliverance. The only time Scripture records Jesus addressing his Father with this phrase was in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prayed for deliverance from death. And it's usage in Romans 8, as well as Galatians 4, is a cry for the consummation of our redemption – at the end of time. "Abba! Father!" is a cry for deliverance from the pain and hardships of this life and an eager expectancy of our inheritance and the life to

come. “Abba! Father!” is a plea for a life with the Father that is free from sin and death and pain and crying.<sup>7</sup>

This is similar to the cry of Russell Moore’s son Maxim when they left him in the orphanage. Russell Moore promised his son that he would not leave him as an orphan, but that he would come for him. When Jesus left this earth he promised his followers that he would not leave them as orphans, but would return to bring them home (Jn. 14:18). Russell Moore eventually took Maxim home. Christ will one day come to take us home. When life gets tough, the Spirit of God in us groans and urges us to pray “Abba! Father!” Deliver us – take us home. So our adoption gives us hope and enables us to stand strong in this life of suffering because we know that one day there will be no more suffering; there will be no more orphans in God’s family! This truth has significant implications on horizontal adoption.

Listen to this quote from Dan Cruver, the president of Together for Adoption.

*Because we understand what it means to cry Abba Father, to cry for deliverance, Christians should understand the cry of the orphan in their distress more than anyone else on earth. And because we have such great riches that are secured and awaiting us in heaven we shouldn’t be afraid to give all we have now in serving those who are in need.*

*If any group of people should be easily mobilized to care for orphans, it should be those in whose hearts God’s love has been poured out through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). No community of people in this world should be more attuned to the cries and groans of orphans than the dearly loved children of God. Therefore, we, of all people on earth, should lead the way in caring for orphans in their affliction.*

And that brings me to the second component of our adoption into the family of God.

### **Adoption into the family of God carries with it great responsibility**

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I will mention two responsibilities we have as children in the family of God.

#### **Children should love their brothers and sisters.**

We touched on this idea in some detail in Hebrews 13, so I will not say much about it this morning except this: God loves each one of his children as individuals. But although adoption is personal it is not private. We’re not merely saved as individuals; we’re adopted into a family. We’re not just saved from something (the wrath of God); we’re saved into something (the family of God). And as a result of that we are called to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called to care for orphans, but our first call is to care for those in the household of God (Gal. 6:10).

#### **Children should honor their Father.**

There is no mention of adoption in the Old Testament. However, in Romans 9:4 Paul says, “*to Israel belongs the adoption.*” What this means is that Israel was seen as God’s son in the Old

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<sup>7</sup> Cruver, Dan

Testament. We know this is true because Israel is called God's son many times in the Old Testament (i.e. Ex. 4:22). In the ancient world a child was expected to do what their parents did. If they reflected their parents, in behavior and character, they brought honor to their parents. If they were a poor reflection of their parents then they brought dishonor to their parents.

The Israelites were given the law, or the Commandments. But the commandments in the Old Testament were not arbitrary commands. The law of God flows out of the very character of God. So when the Israelites obeyed the law they brought honor to the Father because they reflected the very nature of God through their obedience as his son. When they disobeyed God's law they brought dishonor to his name.

So how do we, as adoptive sons and daughters of God, bring honor and glory to our heavenly Father? We bring honor to our heavenly Father by obeying his commandments – by reflecting the very character of God found in his commandments.

We are commanded to love. But why are we commanded to love? 1 John 4:19 says, "*We love because he first loved us.*" We are commanded to forgive. But why are we commanded to forgive? Ephesians 5:32 says, "*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*" James 1:27 says we are to visit orphans in their affliction. What this means is we are to care for orphans. But why are we commanded to care for orphans? We are called to care for orphans because we, who were once spiritual orphans, have been adopted into the family of God. When we care for orphans we are doing the very thing that God does. And when we do what God does we bring honor to our heavenly Father!

Friends, this command is given to each of us. It's not just for some. But notice that this command doesn't say that we are all called to adopt an orphan. It says that we are to visit orphans in their distress – which means in essence that we are to care for them. How can we care for orphans in their distress?

I'll share the 10 ways the "Hope For Orphans" Ministry suggests.<sup>8</sup>

1. **Pray for them:** This is the one way all of us can care for orphans.
2. **Speak up for them** – Proverbs 31:8 says, "*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.* In a general way that is what I am doing this morning. You too can talk about these things and spread the word. Another way could be on a political level – when we see injustice we should defend the rights of all who are destitute.
3. **Provide for their needs.** We did this indirectly with the Numana food packing event. We can do this by sending money to orphanages.
4. **Support those who support them.** Support from a distance those who are on the frontlines of orphan care ministry or who are pursuing adoption. This could be financial, but it could

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<sup>8</sup>"10 Ways Every Christian Can Care for the Orphan and Waiting Child." This handout can be downloaded at [www.hopefororphans.org](http://www.hopefororphans.org).

also come in the form of service or encouragement. One example of this is what Amy Ferrell just did on her recent trip to Uganda. She cared for the kids of a woman who ran the Amatti Baby Cottage, an orphanage in Uganda.

5. **Protect them.** This could include ministries of building orphanages to get kids off of the streets. There is a couple, in our church right now, who are trying to find a home to house teen moms who have no place to live and are vulnerable. Jeremy is trying to recruit people who could provide emergency hospitality to students in our 12:two ministry if they are in a crisis situation at home.
6. **Visit them where they are.** Take a short term missions trip to an orphanage. Take a meal to a family with foster kids.
7. **Give sacrificially to them.** Support families financially who are wanting to adopt (you may not be called to adopt, but you can help others who are) – in the same way that you may not be called to vocational ministry, but you support those who are.
8. **Encourage them.** Become a mentor to foster care kids. Become a pen pal to an orphan. The EFCA has a ministry called Global Fingerprints. You can sign up to sponsor a child who has become an orphan as a result of HIV/AIDS or another tragic circumstance. It's like sponsoring a Compassion child, except it works exclusively with orphans.<sup>9</sup>
9. **Mobilize your church for them.** I have been praying along with many others in this church for an adoption and orphan care ministry in this church. This ministry would support and encourage and facilitate all of the activities I've mentioned so far in an intentional way. Would you join me in praying for this?
10. **Adopt them into your family (or foster them).** Many families in the church have adopted or been foster care parents. [*Have all stand who have either adopted or been foster care parents at some point in their life. All stand who have either been adopted or were ever in the foster care system. All stand who have done some ministry for/to orphans.*] Praise God for what he is doing through this church!

I've been trying to show you many different ways you can get involved. Orphan care is for everyone who has been adopted into the family of God. However, I don't want the first nine things I mentioned to be a cop out for those of you who may be feeling God tug at your heart to adopt or be foster parents.

According to Dan Cruver over 30% of all Christians have seriously considered adoption, but only 2% have actually adopted. If you do the math, only 7% of the professing Christians in the world would need to adopt to eliminate the orphan crisis for now. According to SRS there are about 1,000 foster kids in Sedgwick County at any given time? Of those 1000 kids, 300 were awaiting adoption as of February 2010.<sup>10</sup> My point is there is plenty of opportunity to respond to the command in James 1:27 – around the world, and right here in Wichita.

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<sup>9</sup> More information about this ministry can be found at [www.globalfingerprints.org](http://www.globalfingerprints.org).

<sup>10</sup> Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, Children and Family Services.

Adoption is not only for those who are struggling with infertility. Adoption is not only for young couples. The question I challenge you to ask yourself today is a question I was asked at the Adopting for Life conference: Why shouldn't I adopt or foster a child? Not why should I adopt, but in light of my own adoption into God's family why shouldn't I adopt. There may be a number of legitimate reasons to not adopt or foster a child. And if that's the case I've given you nine other ways you can respond, but I challenge you to ask the harder question. And know that Maggie and I are asking the same one along with you.

I've asked Jerry and Glenda Lott to come and share their story with you about how they came to the point of adopting two children.

*Jerry:*

*I'm Jerry Lott and this is my wife, Glenda and our daughter Kendra. Our son, Renny is out there somewhere, I hope. We have an adoption story that was orchestrated by God, from the very beginning.*

*Glenda:*

*Our adoption story began with my salvation about 16 years ago and Jerry's shortly after. We had two grown daughters and were immensely enjoying our status as "empty nesters." After learning what Jesus did for me on that cross, I decided I wanted to give something back to Him by doing some volunteer work so I said "God, use me" and He did.*

*He led me to a teen mom mentoring program. There I was assigned to a young mother with 2 children named Renny & Kendra. Kendra was only 6 months old and Renny was a year and a half.*

*Jerry:*

*I was okay with her doing this volunteer work until one day she asked to bring the children to our home because their mother had to have some surgery and needed a sitter. My immediate response was "no way." I did not want a couple of little kids under foot. But, I relented and it wasn't long before we were bringing them home on a regular basis. And it wasn't long before God changed my heart from "putting up" with them to loving them.*

*Glenda:*

*Jerry & I worked 2 ½ years to keep mother and children together but the courts decided the children were not safe and removed them from their birth mother. Renny & Kendra were then put into the foster care system at 3 and 4 years old.*

*It was no accident that we had already started taking foster care classes just in case such a thing would happen. We were told our chances were slim of being able to foster children we already knew but God's hand was all over the situation and soon the children were living with us full time. But even then our goal was to get them back to their birth mother. When we found out the parental rights had*

*been terminated, we had to make the hardest decision of our lives. To adopt or not to adopt. Adoption meant permanent. It meant starting over for us. It meant preschool and teen years again. It meant sacrifice. It was my turn to say “no way.”*

*Jerry:*

*I felt very strongly that God wanted us to make that sacrifice and raise Renny & Kendra so after much prayer and counseling, we started the adoption process. After several years of waiting and wondering, we were finally approved. We love them every bit as much as if they were our biological children. Just like God adopted us into his forever family and gave us an inheritance, we have made them our heirs along with our other two children. It’s not always easy, especially now that they are teenagers, but they bring us a lot of joy and we are so glad they are part of our family. Kendra here, is our comic relief. She keeps us laughing.*

*Kendra:*

*I was not born into a loving Christian family but I thank God that I was adopted into one. We made it through preschool and braces and now I’m a teenager. I wish I were the parent because they just don’t know anything. But I’m told they’ll get smarter as I get older. Speaking of getting older, today is my Dad’s birthday. Happy Birthday Daddy.*

### **Conclusion: If you don’t know the gospel you can’t show the gospel**

There is a reason I didn’t simply preach a sermon on James 1:27 this morning. We can’t respond to orphans in their distress in ways that will honor God and be faithful to the gospel without first understanding our own adoption into the family of God. Horizontal adoption is one way we can show the gospel – we can show the world what God has done for us. But we can’t show the gospel if we don’t know the gospel. We can’t care for orphans if we don’t understand our own adoption.

Dan Cruver says there are two reasons for this. One reason is if we’re not convinced of the Father’s love for us, as it was demonstrated in Jesus work on our behalf, then we won’t have the emotional capital to visit orphans in their distress over the long haul – it is simply too hard of a ministry. If we’re not convinced of the Father’s love for us our eyes will turn inward and we will be primarily concerned with our own needs, rather than the needs of orphans. As a result, we’ll be afraid to risk or do the hard work that needs to be done.

Another reason we must understand our adoption if we’re going to care for orphans in their distress is that we may be tempted to care for orphans with the wrong motivation. We may try to earn God’s favor or the praise of others by doing good deeds. Or we may use it to try to meet our personal needs, such as a need for significance.

This type of orphan care doesn’t bring honor to God and is not faithful to the gospel because there is nothing you can do to earn God’s favor. And you don’t need to. You aren’t a savior – only Jesus is the Savior. Orphan care, and all good deeds for that matter, should flow out of the love God has for us – it should not be a way to try to earn God’s love.

The Son of God became a man so that we might become sons and daughters of God. The only proper motivation to care for orphans is a response to that love and a desire to bring the Father honor by doing what he has done for us.

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