

“This is a thoroughly helpful book by a pastor who loves people and spends a lot of time listening to them and hearing the questions they actually ask (which are not always the questions we pastors want them to ask!). Matt Fuller engages the reader with a light touch and earthy pastoral realism, behind which lie a clear theological mind and careful study.”

Christopher Ash, *Writer-in-Residence at Tyndale House and Ministry Trainer at St. Andrew the Great, Cambridge and author of “Zeal Without Burnout”*

“Christians struggle if we fail to believe in both the wonderful status given us forever when we are born again *and* the fact that the Lord responds to how we then live. Matt Fuller’s book is an accessible, down-to-earth, sustained reflection on how we can keep these important truths together.”

Garry Williams, *Director of The John Owen Centre, London Theological Seminary*

“Matt Fuller has done a superb job in taking us to the point where our unconditional, unearned and secure status in Christ meets our dynamic, progressive transformation in Christ-likeness. This book is clearly written, drenched in pastoral concern, answering real questions and coloured with helpful illustrations. It’s the book I wanted to write—and it’s a book I loved reading.”

Ray Galea, *Lead Pastor, St Alban’s MBM, Australia*

“How can we be sure that our status before God is unchanging (we are justified) when our personal walk with the Lord is so erratic (we still sin)? If Christ has paid the penalty for all our sin, then why do we need to confess it? With penetrating insight and a pastor’s heart, Matt mines the treasure of the precious doctrine of justification by faith alone and encourages us to keep working out our salvation, secure in the knowledge that we are God’s children if we trust him to the end.”

Carrie Sandom, *Associate Minister for Women at St John’s, Tunbridge Wells and Director of Women’s Ministry at the Proclamation Trust, London*

“Reading *Perfect Sinners* brought so much joy to my soul. It’s not only biblically rich and beautifully written with quite brilliant stories and illustrations. It addresses supremely important questions that members of our congregations often ask about salvation in Christ: questions about God’s love and our failure, about justification and transformation, about guilt and assurance, about falling away and discipline. This is not just a heart-warming read—Matt has given us a really important book which clarifies the nature of saving faith in simple language for a new generation. I absolutely love it!”

Richard Coekin, *Senior Pastor of Dundonald Church and Director of Co-Mission in London*

“Matt Fuller explains and applies the beautiful gem of justification by faith in ways that will help you love Jesus more. Many of the issues we struggle with—doubt, assurance, half-heartedness, joylessness, guilt, disobedience—are shown to be issues related to justification and are addressed in helpful, practical, clear ways. I wholeheartedly recommend this excellent work.”

Tim Rudge, *Field Director, UCCF*

“Guilt and grace, faith and works, justification and sanctification, warnings and assurance... How do these things fit together? 500 years after the start of the Reformation, many remain confused about such matters. Clear, insightful, engaging, pastoral and, most importantly, biblical—*Perfect Sinners* is a timely antidote for such confusion.”

Rob Smith, *Lecturer in Theology and Ethics, Sydney Missionary & Bible College*

“Here’s a book that will benefit Christians, whatever our stage of following Christ. No quick fixes. Instead, a thoroughgoing biblical call to persevering faith and trust in Christ, and a developing grasp of what it means to be accepted in the Beloved.”

Trevor Archer, *London Director, FIEC*

Matt Fuller

PERFECT

SINNERS

See yourself as God sees you

thegoodbook
COMPANY

*Dedicated to the memory of John Fuller.
I'm thankful for the constancy and sacrifice
of your fatherhood.
I never doubted your love for me.
I'm thrilled to have made you proud.*

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What does God think of me?

“What does he think of me?”

This can be a crucial question.

It’s an anxious question when we’ve been interviewed for a job: “Did the interviewers’ like me? Err... I think so, but they did frown when I said I hated hard work.” The interviewers’ verdict can make or break us.

It’s a nervous question when we’ve performed a piece of music for an exam, or publicly for a crowd, and we wonder, “Will I pass?” or, “What did they think of me?”

It’s a burning question when there’s someone we like romantically: “I’ve dropped heavy hints. I kept gazing awkwardly at them. So, what do they think of me?”

In all these cases, someone else’s opinion matters intensely. It can feel like the only thing that matters.

But nothing affects us in the same way as: “What does God think of me?” His opinion utterly transforms our lives *now* and determines our future in *eternity*.

Nothing matters more.

I recently sat with a man with only a few weeks to live. I asked if he expected to go to heaven when he died. It was a sobering conversation because, at the end of your life, only one thing matters: “What does God think of me?” His verdict determines our eternal destiny.

As well as our destiny, the knowledge of God’s verdict *then* is meant to profoundly affect our lives *now*. More than anyone else’s opinion, understanding God’s approval can transform how we think, feel and act.

I remember my first job interview, at the age of 22 (I’m not counting a paper round). It was pretty intense but that night they rang and offered me the job and a salary. I accepted, put down the phone and giggled. No one had paid me proper money before! I could move city, rent a home, and buy dinner out—a whole new world opened up for me. The opinion of the interview panel had an obvious impact on my life.

A few years later I asked my girlfriend to marry me. After an unsettling period of delay, the answer was happily yes and I was dancing on clouds. The fact that someone was willing to commit to a lifetime of marriage to me was a source of wonder to myself (and many others).

These verdicts upon me affected me deeply and made significant changes to my life. Yet, God’s opinion has an *incomparable* capacity to transform your life.

Of course God loves me, but... err...

As Christians, we sometimes get confused about how God thinks of us. So we ask ourselves, and each other:

Q: I’m a Christian; so God loves me in Jesus. Is there really nothing I can do to make him love me more or less?

Q: Does God love all Christians the same?

Q: Should I ever feel guilty? Is that appropriate?

Q: If I'm always forgiven, what's going on when I confess sin? Am I even more forgiven?

Q: Do some Christians get greater reward in heaven? How come? Where does grace fit in?

Q: If God will never let me go, why does the Bible warn against falling away? Am I in danger of turning away from God?

These questions are asked by Christians who know that God's verdict upon our lives is meant to bring enormous joy. But we're never entirely sure what his view of us is.

At the heart of these questions is a blurring of our "status before God" and our daily "walk with God". I've compared them in the table below. Everything on the status side became true when you became a Christian and will remain true into eternity. By contrast, our walk with God changes regularly; perhaps on a daily basis (or even hourly). Our godliness is not constant; nor is our experience of God.

Our status is deliberately in capitals because, in a healthy Christian, it's our status before God that gives us confidence that God loves us. When we allow our walk with God to shape how we imagine he views us, then we'll wobble and be anxious.

OUR STATUS BEFORE GOD	Our walk with God
UNCHANGING	Fluctuating
UNCONDITIONAL	Conditional
JUSTIFIED	Progressively sanctified
FATHER'S LOVE FOR US	Father's pleasure with us or displeasure
FORGIVEN	Fluctuating guilt/forgiveness
WE ARE DECLARED HOLY	We are growing in holiness

In this book we'll pull apart our "status" before God and our "walk" with him. Both come from being "in Christ". We're

united to Jesus as a branch is to a tree. All spiritual life flows from him to us. Yet the distinction between “status” and “walk” is key.

500 years ago, Martin Luther started the Reformation with the discovery that he was *simul justus et peccator*. I only know this one Latin phrase, but it’s a good one. It means we’re simultaneously justified before the Lord and yet still a sinner. This is true of every Christian. We are:

Perfect: our status before the Lord never changes. We are always righteous before him and so he loves us deeply.

Sinners: our walk before the Lord is highly variable, which is why we sometimes feel guilty and wonder what God thinks of us.

It’s because we’re both *perfect* and *sinful* that the godly person is genuinely excited to know God as Father and yet bewildered by the times when they don’t care about him. They are thrilled by the promises in the gospel and yet despair over how often they doubt them. Sadly, that’s normal Christian living. We should long to change but not despair that change takes time.

Holding both together

Even when we mentally get our heads around being both perfect and sinners, living it out is hard. Most Christians (and churches) lean in one direction more than the other. Consider two absurdly named people: “Status Steve” and “Walking Wendy”.

“Status Steve” is rock solid on the truth that God has accepted him through Jesus. He’s an upbeat chap who sings loads of Christian songs and enjoys his church, where he is affirmed. This is great! The downside is that he doesn’t really consider how to love and serve others or how God wants him to change. Steve is confident that God loves him whatever he

does and so he mostly does whatever he wants, even when the Bible tells him not to. Because, hey, God always loves him, so what does it matter if he sleeps with his girlfriend and gets drunk most weekends?!

By contrast, “Walking Wendy” is obsessed by how well she’s living the Christian life. She assesses her obedience daily. She’s always looking to repent of anything that doesn’t please the Lord. She daily confesses all she’s done wrong and seeks to express her love for God by obeying him. This is great! The downside is that she’s anxious and introspective. She seems happier reciting a confession than singing a hymn of praise.

Both of these are caricatures, but they help us to have some idea of which way we lean. Of course, it’s possible to flit between being a “Steve” and a “Wendy”: sometimes feeling secure in our status before God, but other times obsessing about our walk with him. Yet the Christian life is healthiest when both are combined so that we’re aware both of being perfect in status and also a sinner in our Christian walk. Not aware of this just formally as doctrines we believe, but practically as truths that affect how we live. It’s surprisingly hard to get right.

We’re going to spend the first three chapters focusing upon our status before God. We need to have that clearly and joyfully in place before we get into the often more confusing areas about how we live this truth out.

Which means we need to start in the courtroom...

1. How can God love me when he hates sin?

Only once have I spent time in court. To be clear, it wasn't for my own crime—I was on jury service.

We were a pretty odd bunch. One woman was so terrified she couldn't swear her oath. Another juror was clearly distracted and it emerged she was listening to an iPod under her headscarf. I was "Mr Keen", diligently making notes, so I was pathetically pleased with myself when elected jury foreman. That was, until the moment I had to deliver the verdict.

We had deliberated over the evidence and made our decision. The judge asked me to stand and deliver a verdict: "Do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?" I looked at the 30-year-old man in the dock. I don't suppose I'll say another single word with the same impact in the whole of my life.

"Guilty."

The defendant was taken away for a lengthy spell in prison.

The Bible is clear that one day all of us will appear in God's courtroom:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. (Romans 3 v 19-20)

We're all in trouble before God's law. That means we're in trouble with him. Of course, the Bible talks about our relationship with God in many ways. But underpinning many other ways of explaining how God thinks of us, the Bible clearly uses the language of the courtroom. We are facing God's judgment.

We need to get this clear in order to rightly enjoy everything the Bible tells us about God's love for us. The moment you devalue the seriousness of God's justice, you undermine the wonder of his love in rescuing us.

A desperate need

The greatest need of every human is God. To stand before him we need "righteousness". Although this is a key Bible word, it's not much used in everyday English. All of us dislike someone who is "self-righteous". Those of a certain vintage may enjoy the songs of pop duo the "Righteous Brothers". Alternatively, I hear the word used in the slang of local kids: "Ah, that curry was righteous". (I think they mean it was good.)

So, what does the Bible mean?

In simple terms, it means a right standing before God. He is perfectly righteous and so, if we're to be with him, we need to have that righteousness too.

The same little word gets translated different ways in English. At a basic level, you might say:

Righteous = justified = not guilty

Paul contrasts being righteous/justified with being condemned (Romans 5 v 16)—so to be righteous is the opposite of being guilty. But that doesn't fully capture it.

Think of it like this. When I was a juror, we found a 30-year-old man guilty, so he was condemned to eight years in prison. He had naturally hoped to be found “not guilty”. In that case, he would have been free to go. Free to go back to the life he had before.

But imagine if the judge stepped in and said, “You're not simply ‘not guilty’; you're *justified* before me. You're not merely ‘free to go’ but you're ‘free to come’. You're free to come to my house and stay. Plus, because I'm a wealthy judge, you're free to stay in any of my houses around the world. You're free to dine at my expense at any restaurant you desire. What's more, you're free to call me any time you're in trouble. You're free to make any request of me at all. You are righteous before me. Not merely free to go, but free to come and enjoy all the benefits of knowing me.”

The difference is enormous!

To be righteous before God is to be in right standing before him. We enjoy complete access and all the benefits of knowing him. We're free to come.

The big problem for you and me is... that we *are* guilty, and, by nature, unable to come to God. So, how can God, the perfect and righteous judge, forgive us without compromising justice? How can he call us righteous when we're guilty?

In a human court, we'd be outraged if a jury found a man guilty of rape but then the judge said, “I'm in a forgiving mood. So let's just call you innocent—and you're free to come and have a cup of tea with me.” There would be howls of protest at such a miscarriage of justice. Similarly, God cannot

just say, “I’m going to forgive guilty sinners. Let’s pretend nothing ever went wrong.” It would destroy his just character.

So we have this central question: How can God display justice and mercy at the same time? Or to re-phrase it in personal terms: *How can God love me when he hates sin?*

Let’s answer this by looking at Romans 3, and then making three contrasting statements.

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3 v 21-26)

1. God hates sinners and he loves sinners

Before we look at how God combines justice and mercy, we’ll pause to consider how he views us before we become Christians. Romans 3 v 23 tells us that, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. So, how did God view us when we sinned?

The Bible insists that before anyone becomes a Christian, God both loved us and he hated us. That’s strong language, I know. We want to resist it, because we like to think we’re

naturally loveable. Yet, from God's perspective, we're not. Consider these verses (bold text mine):

The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong; you destroy those who tell lies. The bloodthirsty and deceitful **you, LORD, detest.** (Psalm 5 v 5-6)

The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, **he hates with a passion.** (Psalm 11 v 5)

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for **God's wrath remains on them.** (John 3 v 36)

Those are strong words: The Lord detests and hates sinners. His wrath or anger remains on them. There are two common objections to this:

First, people often say, "God hates the sin but loves the sinner". But these verses show that's not true when someone isn't a Christian. We cannot separate our actions from who we are. We're not good people who occasionally sin. We are "sinners".

We would laugh at a compulsive liar who said, "I always tell the truth, but sometimes lies pop out from me." We'd reply, "No, take ownership of your lies. They're not separate from you. They're not like little frogs jumping out of your pocket. They belong to you. You are a liar."

Or we'd be bewildered by the constantly angry person who said, "I'm a calm person, but sometimes anger bubbles up inside of me". We'd respond, "No, take ownership of your anger".

In the same way, all of our sin belongs to us. It is fundamentally a part of us—a reflection of who we are. Jesus describes our words as coming from us. Our sinful words are not distinct from us; they are a part of us:

A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. (Luke 6 v 45)

We are born as sinners—and God hates sinners. It's part of our identity.

The second common objection is to the idea of God being angry or wrathful: “I like the idea of God as love. But I don't like the idea of him being wrathful.”

Yet God's wrath is his personal reaction to sin. One drawback with focusing on the law-court imagery is that in a court the judge is meant to be neutral and not personally involved. We would never allow someone to sit as a judge in a murder trial if the victim had been his daughter. He'd be far too close to the case.

Yet God *is* personally involved. Our sin is a personal assault upon the Lord—as we reject his laws and trust ourselves instead. And yet he is a perfect judge, never mastered by emotions. He is *both* personally affronted by our sin *and* perfectly just in his sentencing. No human could manage both. In a helpful phrase of the late preacher John Stott, God's wrath is “his steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising, *personal* antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations” (*The Cross of Christ*).

So, before I became a Christian in April 1993, God hated me because I was a guilty rebel. I was under his anger or wrath... and yet... at the same time... he loved me.

It's easy to sing of God's amazing love for us. Yet it's only when we understand his hatred of us as sinners that we can see the depths of quite how wonderful and unlikely his love is. The perfect, holy God sees all that we are as sinners. Nothing is hidden from him. The full filth of our lives and the complete extent of our rejection of him are transparent. And still he loves us.

Deep down we all want to believe there's something inherently appealing in us. We assume that God is drawn to us *a little bit* by our innate qualities. But he did not look down upon us from heaven and think, "They're wicked—and yet so lovely that I'm drawn to love them". No, we are worthless (see Romans 3 v 10-20). *God loves us purely because he is loving.*

Before I was a Christian, God loved me and he hated me. The moment I became a Christian and trusted Jesus' work for me, all God's hatred and wrath was removed, and all that remains for me is his love. The same is true for every Christian.

How does that work?

2. God the Father punishes his Son and justifies sinners

Here is how God can punish sin and yet declare us in right standing (righteous) before him. The familiar truth at the heart of the Christian message is the great exchange upon the cross.

There are moments in life when I flippantly think I'd like to exchange lives with someone else. I was recently stuck in traffic for hours going nowhere when a friend sent a picture of him and his family playing on a beautiful beach. At that moment, I'd have gladly swapped my situation for his.

At one level, the exchange upon the cross is that simple.

1. Christ took upon himself our sin and so endured God's wrath.
2. We receive Christ's righteousness upon us and so enjoy God's blessing.

Romans 3 v 25 is central in revealing how God can be just as he does this:

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by

faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. (Romans 3 v 25)

We've said that, in a human court, a judge can't just let a criminal off when he's guilty. The same is true for the God of perfect justice. God *will punish* sin. The cross is the place where he has done that, while also showing mercy. No single illustration captures the wonder of this completely. We'll need many throughout this book to try and get a balanced picture. But for a start, think of it this way:

In the 19th century, a man was conscripted to serve overseas in the army. He had just married, so a friend kindly stepped in as a substitute. The friend served nobly for several years until tragically dying in battle. Some time later the original man was conscripted for a second time but refused to serve. He appeared in court and pleaded that his friend had already gone in his place, served in the war, and indeed had been killed in his place. He pleaded that his friend served and died *for him and as him*. Therefore justice had been done and it would be unjust to make him serve and die a second time. As the story goes, the judge agreed and the man was free to go. His role had been taken and paid for.

Similarly, Jesus has exchanged places with the Christian. Legally, God has punished my sin "in Christ" and he will not punish me twice.

Let's push that further. The Bible insists that when the Christian's sin is punished "in Christ" we are also crucified with him (Galatians 2 v 20). Not physically, but spiritually in our union with him. Think of it this way:

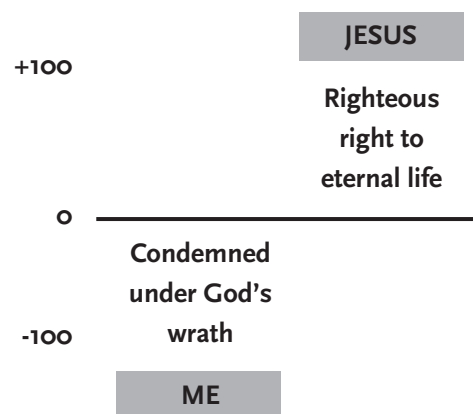
A few years ago a plane took off near St Louis, Missouri, but hit a power cable causing an engine to burst into flames. There were six passengers on board for a skydiving lesson, but the plane was

never going to climb high enough for a safe jump. The quick-thinking dive instructor was a man named Robert Cook. He grabbed hold of one of the divers called Kim Dear. He strapped himself to her and, as the plane was about to crash, made sure he was beneath her to take the impact of the ground. His body was crushed but she survived. Kim Dear was united to her saviour, who died so that she might live. Again, no illustration is perfect, but we must remember that it is by being united to Jesus that we obtain the benefits of his work.

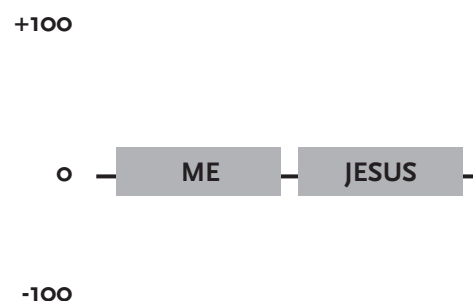
When we're united to Christ, he takes our punishment and we receive his righteousness.

It's **not** that, before we trust in Jesus, we have a tragic moral score of -100...

Jesus has great moral score of +100...



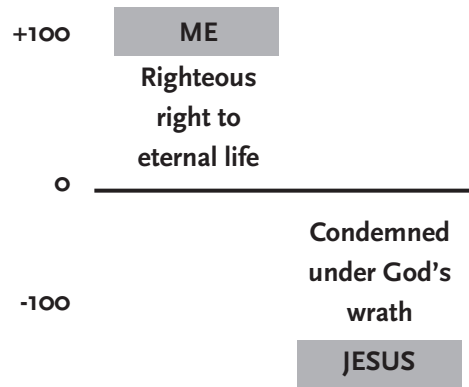
...and when he died for us, he cancelled out our negative, and so we're now neutral.



NO!

Rather, Jesus took our -100,
and we receive his +100.

Wonderfully, this is a status
that does not vary and
cannot be lost.



Back in the Garden of Eden, there was a time when Adam had done nothing wrong. He had a perfect relationship with God. Yet it was always possible for him to muck up morally. He was always on probation.

Some people will know that experience. Often, when you start a job, you're put on a three-month probation period. You've done nothing wrong but you have no security either. It can be an anxious time, as you know that your performance is being watched and assessed. It's a relief when you pass your period of probation and become a permanent employee with greater rights.

For you and me, we are **not** on probation as Adam was. When you become a Christian and join "God PLC", you're given the lifetime service record of Jesus Christ. You can never be sacked. You have 10,000 years of brilliant service on your file. You have all the pay and pension rights of a star employee. It's impossible for the boss to view you with anything but love and delight.

Or, to return to a legal picture, we *don't* live life on trial, uncertain of what God's verdict will be in the future. The verdict is in already—and it's that we're justified, righteous and free to come.

When we trust in Jesus' work on the cross, we are not merely pardoned; we are positively *righteous*. We are perfect in God's sight.

It's a legal verdict upon us. It's a permanent change of status. It's 100% certainty that God accepts us.

3. God displays justice and shows mercy

The great exchange upon the cross is how God combines justice and mercy. As Paul writes:

He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

(Romans 3 v 25-26)

The sins of Old Testament believers such as Abraham, Moses and David were left unpunished in history. Jesus pays for all of them on the cross too.

Here is the union of infinite love with inflexible justice. The wonder of this is that when we appear before God the Father as judge, we're not going to be pleading for mercy. John describes Jesus as our advocate before the Father (1 John 2 v 1). If you ever needed a lawyer, God himself, Christ the Son, is the best possible one. The picture here is that when we stand in God's courtroom at the end of history, Jesus is our lawyer, God the Father is judge, and there's no doubt about the verdict.

This is a scene they planned together before the creation of the world! When we stand in God's courtroom, it is not that Jesus' great love is pleading against the Father's stern justice. Jesus is not twisting the arm of an unwilling Father. Instead, Jesus pleads for justice: *This man or woman is indeed guilty, but I have paid in full for their crimes and they are righteous.* The Father replies, *Yes, this is how I lovingly bestow mercy.*

How can God love you when he hates your sin? He can do so because on the cross he has justly punished your sin and granted you Jesus' righteousness. Your status has changed.

That may not sound exciting. It may not immediately affect the way we feel and act. But it should and it will because justification isn't *merely* the transfer of a quality from Jesus to us; it's intimacy with him as we're united by faith.

Imagine a millionaire who catches a scamp breaking into his house. He kindly decides that, rather than have him arrested, he will adopt him as his own child. Legally the boy becomes his son. Now, there is no biological or moral change within the boy. His genetic make-up isn't affected, but his status certainly is. Although it's a legal change, it affects *everything* about the boy's status and his happiness and his future. It's a truth that *will* shape his character over time.

We're not just pardoned; we're loved. We're not just innocent but adopted. We're not just liberated but awarded the right to eternal life.

So, don't live life as though on trial before God, uncertain of his verdict. The verdict is in and God says, *You're righteous. A perfect sinner. Come near and enjoy me.*