

About Children and Being Like Them

Mark 10:13-16 (cf 9:36-37)

May 12, 2024

Infant Dedication and Baptism

Prayer:

We have been re-visiting some of our Lord's astonishing teachings from Mark's gospel.

This morning we look at a very familiar passage. It is so famous that many have heard it before. It is so short that we tend to roll right past it. It is the story about people bringing their children to Jesus and how Jesus received and blessed each one.

Every time I read it, I have some ideas and maybe even an image in my mind as to what was taking place. Maybe you do too. But just how accurate are we?

In this story I think that there is enough of a cultural difference between how they viewed children and Jesus' blessing and how we view children and Jesus' blessing that taking the time to unpack some of these differences will be helpful.

I'd like to read today's passage, then talk about how the people and the disciples viewed this moment and see what that does to help us grasp the astonishing nature of our Lord's teaching here. Mark 10:13-16.

¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

People were bringing little children to Jesus.

We don't know who these people were but the very fact that they are not named tells us that they were common, unremarkable folk. Unlike the specifically named rich young man whose story comes next;ⁱ these people were probably peasants, and they were probably mostly mothers.

They were bringing little children to Jesus. The word for children points to any child 12 years old or younger, including infants. Since verse 16 says that Jesus took them in His arms, they must have been babies or toddlers, which matches the wording Luke used when he wrote about this story (Lk 18:15).

Why were they bringing their children to Jesus? The text simply says that they brought them so that Jesus might touch them. Nothing is said about a verbal blessing here. Just a touch. It is not hard to see why. Touch was a significant part of our Lord's ministry.

Earlier in Mark we read how Jesus reached out and touched the man with leprosy or took hold of a dead girl's hand before raising her back to life (1:41; 5:41). In chapter 6 Mark tells us that when Jesus entered a new area the sick from the entire region came to the marketplace of any town he was in and begged Him to let them touch even the edge of His cloak (6:56).ⁱⁱ

Time after time Jesus touched the person He was about to heal or those who needed healing reached out to touch Him. This was very unusual.

Other religious leaders would not touch a stranger or allow themselves to be touched by others out of concern of becoming ritually unclean. But Jesus was touching everyone who needed His touch and letting anyone touch him! This connection between Jesus' touch and a physical blessing was clear and noticeable.

While human touch does convey a personal connection, many who wanted Jesus' touch did so because they had a specific need they wanted Jesus to meet. What childhood need were these people trying to meet? What was the result they wanted to see from Jesus' touch? There is more going on here than a photo op with a popular rabbi.

As you might expect, childhood mortality rates were terribly high. Fifty percent of children died before the age of 12 and most of those deaths happened within the first five years—the likely age range of most of the children in our story.

Is this moment like other crowded scenes where desperate people are pressing in on Jesus and calling out His name? Is this moment filled with fearful mothers—most of whom have already lost little ones—holding out their children for Jesus to touch so that they might receive a life-preserving blessing? If so, then you can imagine the intensity of these requests.

Though deeply loved, children were totally dependent and completely uncertain. There were no guarantees that any of them would grow into adults. Once they entered adulthood then they could start carrying responsibility and important tasks. Until then, they were loved and cared for, but society valued them primarily for the age-appropriate work they could do around the house.

That may sound harsh, but the Apostle Paul said to the Galatians that, even though children are heirs of their father's estate, they "are not much better off than slaves until they grow up" (Gal 4:1).

Though deeply loved, a child's status was not very high. They were under the authority and care of others and had not yet achieved the rights and status that come with adulthood. In other words, until they grow up, they are powerless, lack resources and have no certainty of an earthly future.

These insignificant ones were important to Jesus and are the ones to whom God's kingdom belongs.

So people—likely moms, maybe older siblings, possibly dads—were bringing their children to Jesus so that He might touch them. As with other requests, they were likely pressing in as they made an urgent appeal. As they did, the disciples responded to their intensity by rebuking them.

The word rebuke indicates a strong response. We don't know their words or volume but we can clearly infer that they attempted to keep these parents from bringing their dependent and socially unimportant children to Jesus.

Why was that? What might have been motivating them?

This story falls right in the middle of the disciples arguing about which one of them will have the greatest authority in Jesus' kingdom and James and John asking Jesus to assign them seats of greatest authority in His kingdom.

It is important to note that when Jesus confronted their desire to be greatest, He used a young child to illustrate what He meant. Look at Mark 9:35-37.

"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (Mk 9:35-37).

There is an obvious connection between children, what Jesus came to do, the Kingdom of God and what it means to be great in the Kingdom of God.

The people bringing their children were just common folk. The children had no real status or certain future. At the same time the disciples thought they were going to be key players in the world's most powerful kingdom. The contrast here is striking.

I wonder, did the disciples perhaps conclude that this was an inappropriate request and a waste of their time, so they pushed back hard and blocked the children's access to Jesus?

With this picture in mind, let's look again at Jesus' response.

When Jesus saw this, He was indignant. Last week we saw how the ten disciples were indignant toward James and John because they cut in line, making a request for special favor from Jesus. We understand why the ten would be upset with James and John, but what is going on with Jesus?

A few days before our text, Jesus told His disciples that if they welcome a little child in His name, they welcome Him. A few days after that the disciples stopped someone from ministering in Jesus' name because the person was not one of the 12 disciples.

Rather than affirm their action Jesus corrected them. "Do not stop him," Jesus said. Other people can do what you do in my name. It is okay. "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Over the course of a week or two, the disciples argued about who would have the greatest authority in Jesus' kingdom, stopped a man with faith from doing what they were doing because he wasn't one of them, and blocked people from bringing their children to Jesus.

No wonder Jesus was indignant. He was irritated by their resistance to learn (9:36-37) and upset at their attitude toward others (9:38-39). While we often focus on what Jesus felt toward the disciples, I think it is most helpful to consider what this says about how He felt toward others.

Our Lord's displeasure with the disciples reveals His deep compassion for and defense of the helpless, vulnerable and powerless.

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ I tell you the truth [Jesus used this lead in before any important teaching], anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

God's kingdom belongs to *such as these*. There is something about children that Jesus uses to describe a type of person. To say that the kingdom of God belongs to this type of person means that those in this group have a share in the kingdom. While they cannot claim exclusive ownership, they can be assured of membership and all the benefits that come with entering the kingdom of God.

What is this thing that is found in babies and toddlers that allows a person to enter God's kingdom? Thinking about their low status, high dependence needs, and uncertain future, let's consider the role of humble trust for a moment.

Think of how infants trust. Their entire well-being is in the hands of someone else. They can't prepare or even eat food on their own. They can't keep themselves clean or practice proper hygiene. Shelter, food, clothing, safety, socialization, transportation...a baby relies on someone other than itself to provide everything he or she needs to survive.

Think of how a toddler trusts. While they have a little more ability than a baby, they still require everything from another. As language skills develop, they begin to trust everything that mom or dad says is true—"oh, that's why the moon is in the sky! So, the guy in the red suit goes to every house in the world and comes down through the chimney with gifts for me. Okay, I can believe that." At the same time they aren't worried about the future; they trust that mom or dad will always be there for them and always provide for them.

I remember one summer when our firstborn, Stephen, was about five years old and we were visiting my parents. I was standing beside their deck which was under construction. It had flooring but no railings. I was talking to my brother, Dave, when I heard the pitter-patter of little feet picking up speed and coming toward me.

I turned just in time to see Stephen launch himself in the air right at me. Somewhere along the way he figured it would be a good idea to run full-throttle and hurl himself off the deck at his dad. I am not sure what the end goal in his mind was, but I am sure he had no doubt that it was all going to work out okay.

As I saw him flying toward me with arms outstretched like superman, I was able to take one step back and catch him in mid-flight. When I put his feet on the ground, he laughed with glee before he ran off across the yard.

Little ones live in simple trust that mom and dad are at their jobs. Even though they don't have strength or ability to do it for themselves, they are confident that their needs will be met and whatever situation they are in will work out okay.

As we become adults, we gain the ability to start meeting our own needs and taking care of ourselves. When this happens we can begin to lose this sense of humble trust as we rely more heavily on our ourselves to get what we need and so act as if all things—including entering God's kingdom—are up to us.

To become like a child is to let go of status and take the lowest place as we express total dependency on God. Scripture makes it clear that we are still to work and plan and prepare for the life-stations we are in and the ones that are coming, but when it comes to meeting our needs, our reliance has shifted from trusting in us to trusting in the goodness of God.

"Such as these" are the important ones in God's eyes. These people enjoy a blessing that comes from surrendering to God's rule, trusting His word,ⁱⁱⁱ and entering His kingdom.

Jim Edwards, a retired Professor of Theology at Whitworth University, summarizes it this way.

To receive the kingdom of God as a child is to receive it as one who has no credits, no clout, no claims. A little child has absolutely nothing to bring, and whatever a child receives, he or she receives by grace on the basis of sheer neediness rather than by any merit inherent in him or herself. Little children are paradigmatic disciples, for only empty hands can be filled.^{iv}

Only empty hands can be filled.

Having considered what Jesus said, let's now look at what Jesus did in verse 16. "And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them."

What these children received was much more than a touch. The force of the wording suggests that in an intense and fervent way, one by one, Jesus took the time to enfold, embrace and offer a verbal blessing over each child brought to Him that day.^v

This was no small thing. In an astonishing way, Jesus reversed the accepted value-scale by assigning importance to those who did not carry importance and by stating that anyone who wants to enter the God's kingdom must become like one of these little ones.

The disciples did not yet see this clearly. They struggled to recognize the places where they remained proud, self-reliant, and not like little children. In many places I am like them. Maybe you are too. Thinking of myself as an early disciples brings a few questions to mind.

How might I be relying on something I've done to earn God's favor? In what ways might I live with a sense that God owes me some kind of seat of honor for the good that I've done? When I see someone who, like a baby, requires more attention and help from others than I do, do I look down on them in some way or think they are less important than others...or me?

Where do I misinterpret someone's actions or my Lord's desire and so act as a barrier to Jesus instead of a bridge?

When we take the time to think deeply about these kinds of questions, we reach the place where Jesus' teaching gets as astonishing for us as it was for them.

I tell you the truth. Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, please give us the wisdom to hear your astonishing message with clarity and the courage to follow what you have said. We have many things in our lives, Lord. Show us how we can fully rely on you and not on these things that we think we did for ourselves.

Give us the humility to follow your example and help us trust the words you have said, that we might believe and act on what you have taught confident that you are with us always and that your love will never fail us. Amen.

ⁱ In this story, Jesus gave a lot of time to honor the request of the common person as He touched and offered a personal blessing to each child. The very next story has to do with a rich young man who followed God's law and came to Jesus asking what he must do to receive eternal life. He had power, influence, political standing and a heart to follow God's law. He'd be someone you'd want to give time to, but after a very brief conversation, Jesus lets him walk away.

ⁱⁱ See also:

- He had healed so many that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch Him (3:10).
- The woman was ostracized from community because of her incurable issue of blood, knew that she would be clean if she just touched his clothes (5:28).
- The friends of the man who could not hear or speak begged Jesus to place His hand on him (7:32).
- They brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him (8:22).

ⁱⁱⁱ Up to now, the disciples have resisted the message of Christ's suffering, even to the point of rebuking Jesus for saying such a thing (8:32). But the kingdom is only open to those who will accept the suffering Savior and the words He speaks. This requires that we release our pride and self-dependance and embrace a simple trust in the Lord's presence and words, like a child trusts his or her parents (from Mangum, D., ed. (2020). [*Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*](#)

^{iv} Edwards, J. R. (2002). [*The Gospel according to Mark*](#) (p. 307). Eerdmans; Apollos.

^v What was the blessing? In The Jewish New Testament Commentary David Stern writes:

"...today, every *erev-Shabbat* (Friday evening), at the dining table, the father of the family says to his sons, "God make you like Efrayim and M'nasheh," the sons of Yosef and grandsons of Ya'akov; and to his daughters he says, "God make you like Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah," the wives of the Patriarchs. Then, placing his hand on the child's head, he pronounces the Aaronic Benediction (Numbers 6:24–26):

Adonai bless you and keep you!

Adonai make his face shine on you!

Adonai lift up his face on you and give you *shalom* [peace]!