

# Let the Children Come to Me

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>15</sup> Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. <sup>17</sup> Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Luke 18:15–17)

### The Bootstrap Mentality

- A. There’s something in us that just likes to get things done ourselves. We like to be the one to figure it out. “I don’t need your help. I don’t need your handouts. I’ve got this on my own, thank you.” There’s something in the fallen hearts of men and women that prizes this autonomy, this sense of self-sufficiency and independence.
  - 1. It’s especially in the air we breathe as Americans, right? As a nation, we’ve got that bootstrap mentality—the self-made man/woman sort of thing.
- B. Well, such a notion simply will not stand as far as God is concerned and Jesus has been slowly trying to chip away at this in us for quite some time now. And, it seems to me, that in our text for this morning He’s just going to try to give it the old K.O. punch.
  - 1. This self-reliant, autonomous, independent mentality, while it may get you somewhere in kingdoms of this world, it has no place in the kingdom of God, in fact, it’s a mentality that will keep you from entering His kingdom altogether.
- C. So there is not a little on the line here. Your eternity hangs on what you make of these words. “Here,” Jesus is saying, “is what will determine whether you end up within the gates of God’s kingdom or shut out by them!”

### Flowing Out from Last Week

- A. Before I outline my plan for this morning, I should at least quickly make sure you see how this text flows out from what we looked at last week in [vv. 9-14](#), because the two are, I think, clearly related.
- B. It seems to me that in [vv. 15-17](#), we simply have in tangible, physical, literal form, what in [vv. 9-14](#) was put in the form of a parable.
  - 1. In the parable we investigated last time, you may recall, Jesus spoke of a hyper-religious Pharisee who trusted in himself that he was righteous. He thought he had much to commend himself to God, and he was listing in his “prayer” much of these items, as if reading off his resume or something.

2. But then Jesus introduced us to a man standing in the back of the temple—a sin-stained tax collector—who, beating his breast, with his face to the dirt, could only muster enough courage to cry out for mercy, for atonement, for forgiveness.
- C. And you remember the punch-line, don't you? Jesus said, contrary to all appearance and expectation, it's this second man, that tax collector who "went down to his house justified rather than the other" (v. 14a).
1. What a shocking turn of affairs! This man had no resume to speak of. The only items he could list off were his many failures and sins. The only thing He could hold out to God was a beggar's hand.
    - a. And that's the point! It's the humble, it's the lowly, it's the ones who know they need God and His mercy that are primed to receive it.
- D. And that's what is now put before us quite literally with these infants that are being brought to Jesus. They have nothing to commend themselves to God. The only thing they have to offer is their deep need. And yet they are the ones, Jesus says, to whom His kingdom belongs. You see the connection?
- E. Well, we shall tease this out much further as we dive in. Let me lay the plan before you now. In our text, first we see that (1) Jesus Dignifies What We Devalue (vv. 15-16); then we'll see that (2) Jesus Devalues What We Dignify (v. 17).
1. It really is a different way of riffing on all that we saw last time. It's the reversal of the kingdom of God. And it's brought out most pointedly for us to consider together yet again this morning.

## (1) Jesus Dignifies What We Devalue (vv. 15-16)

- A. Look at vv. 15-16 again real quick: " <sup>15</sup> Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."

### We Devalue

- A. Now if we're going to understand what's happening here properly, we need to get a sense of how children were viewed in the ancient world. For this, let me simply read to you the words of one commentator: "The modern West generally regards the qualities of childlikeness—innocence, trustfulness, humility—as inherently praiseworthy, and hence tenderness to children as virtuous. The ancient world did not regard children likewise. In Judaism, women and children derived their position in society primarily in relation to adult males. Sons were of course regarded as blessings from God, but largely because they ensured the continuance of the family for another generation. In general, 'childhood' was an unavoidable and uncelebrated interim until the young were mature enough to bear children and contribute to the work force. One will search ancient literature in vain for sympathy toward the young comparable to that shown them by Jesus" (PNTC).

1. They have no social status. They have nothing really to offer. Speaking bluntly, they're just kind of another mouth to feed, another burden to bear, until they grow a little older and can actually start to contribute.
- B. Now we're in the modern West and, as the commentator mentioned here, generally speaking, we do value children—we want to celebrate them, protect them, provide for them, educate them, sometimes we even go too far in our valuing of them and spoil them, right?
1. But I do think, if we're honest, even in our culture, and even in our own hearts, we're still prone to see them as something of a nuisance.
    - a. That's why, as I think I've mentioned before, statistics are showing that Millennials, as they're getting older and should be by now starting to have families of their and things . . . they're not having kids.
      - i. And, as a parent of three, listen, in one sense, I get it. Having kids is hard. They're going to mess up your plans. You thought you were going to get a solid 6 straight hours of sleep. But baby's got more teeth coming in and she's up so you're up. She doesn't care about your plans, your needs.
    - b. And I know it's a bit heavy to say it, but this is the sort of logic that underlies the idea of abortion as well, right? We can dress up the rhetoric any way we want and call it women's "reproductive rights" or whatever, but at the bottom it's really just this: "I don't want a child. I don't feel ready. I don't feel qualified. This would be too hard on me. I still want to be young and unchained." Whatever it is.
- C. So, certainly, we still have something of devaluing of children in our modern culture as well. But it was especially poignant in Jesus' day, which is why the disciples respond the way that they do. When they see these parents bringing their kids to Jesus "they rebuked them" (v. 15b). That's a strong word.
1. Now, to be fair, it is likely that this was a well-intentioned rebuke—something along the lines of Peter's rebuke of Jesus when Jesus mentions to His disciples that He's headed to Jerusalem and He's going to suffer and die: "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you'" (Matt 16:22). Peter meant well here. He was just off by 180 degrees!
    - a. And so it is with this rebuke in our text. They probably were thinking the King doesn't have time for such simple, mundane things like playing with kids. He should be busying Himself with far more significant matters.

## Jesus Dignifies

- A. But Jesus flips the rebuke back onto them. He's going to here dignify what we tend to devalue.
- B. In Mark's account of this story, we're told that "when Jesus saw [how the disciples were responding], he was indignant . . ." (Mark 10:14). I love this. Here we see what I would call the ferocity of his mercy, the indignation of His compassion, the fire of His love!

- C. Think about it. What makes you indignant? Isn't when other people treat you poorly, when some injustice has been done to you? They said that. They did that. It wasn't fair. You're angry.
1. But do you want to know what makes Jesus indignant? When we devalue, not Him per se, but others, when we show little regard for the helpless and the marginalized and the oppressed. When we stand in the way of grace rather than for the advance of it. When we hinder those whom He loves deeply from coming to Him for help.
    - a. In many ways, it's similar to what He's said elsewhere: *"It would be better for [one] if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin"* (Luke 17:2). The fury of His mercy. The indignation of His compassion. The fire of His love. Don't get in the way!

## Talk and Touch

- A. If you want to know what Jesus truly feels about those helpless and devalued and marginalized, as children in His day were, you just need to look at how He treats them here. There are two things in particular to bring out:
- B. First, He calls them to Himself: *"But Jesus called them to him . . ."* (v. 16a). It's very interesting. It's clear from the Greek grammar—because the words are actually given what's called "grammatical gender"—that Jesus is not calling the disciples here, nor the parents of these children, but the children themselves. The *"them"* (v. 16) whom He is calling to Himself corresponds with the *"infants"* of v. 15.
1. And this is beautiful. He dignifies what we devalue. He speaks right to the children themselves and calls them in towards Himself.
    - a. You've been a part of a conversation, perhaps, where people are just kind of talking over you, or maybe even ignoring you entirely, because they just don't think you're input would be valuable or whatever. Well, listen to me, Jesus isn't like that. He speaks right to you. It may even be He's calling to you even now.
- C. Secondly, we see that Jesus not only talks to these children, He touches them: *"Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them"* (v. 15a).
1. Now, that word today has been so sexualized and distorted. We can probably barely read it without thinking of Jesus as a sort of creeper or something. Jesus is touching kids, it just doesn't sound right, and yet there is nothing more right than this.
    - a. It's the touch, not of exploitation, not of abuse, not of oppression, not of pedophilia, but of love, of acceptance, of welcome, of blessing.
      - i. It is a scandalous touch, no doubt, but not in the way that our perverted minds would make of it. It is scandalous because the King of Kings so values and cares for the lowest and least.

- D. We have seen Him put this touch to use before, have we not?
1. In [Luke 5:13](#), He stretches His hand out to touch the leprosy man, and the leprosy vanishes!
  2. In [Luke 7:14](#), He comes up in the midst of a funeral procession and touches the bier of the dead boy, and dead boy sits up.
  3. And later, [Luke 22:51](#), we'll see that when Peter, with a sword, cuts the ear off of a man who's attempting to chain up Jesus, Jesus, even to this would be enemy, with a touch, restores him.
    - a. There is something to this touch. It pictures just how close Jesus is willing to get to the unclean, the sinful, the oppressed, the marginalized.
- E. In fact, with Christmas upon us, I feel it especially appropriate to point out that Jesus will do more than merely touch humanity in our place of need, right? He will take it all on Himself and ultimately give His life for our healing.
1. The clearest indication that Jesus values little children is the fact that He Himself became one. He didn't just call to, He came towards. He didn't just touch, He took on.
    - a. And He does all of this so that He can save.

## Two Quick Points of Application

- A. Before we transition to the second heading, there are two quick points of application I want to consider here.
- B. In the first case, the encouragement is for you who feel like the outsider, the devalued.
1. Jesus is always breaking down barriers that men in their sin erect. Jesus doesn't buckle to the disciples at this point, to the spirit of His day. He refuses to let that religion which bears His name become one of hierarchy, status, and division. He is doing all He can to make it plain to us that Christianity is a religion of grace. Whatever else men may try to make of it, here is what Christ would have it be. You are so loved by Him. Come!
- C. But in the second case, we have to ask ourselves, if this is what He has intended for His kingdom to be like, is this what we are like? Are we sending the world mixed messages, like these disciples? We may talk, perhaps, of loving the marginalized, the lost, and so forth, but do we ever really make the time to go to them or serve them?
1. You know, wherever true Christianity has been it's always had this inertia towards these things.
    - a. Back in the days of the early church, in the Greco-Roman world there, it was common for babies to be "exposed"—left for dead on the side of the road or in the trash because the parents didn't want them, couldn't raise them, etc.
      - i. Well, Christians would take them in and give them a home. They developed hospitals with designated sections for these children. They later developed

orphanages to this end as well. In fact, Christians “gained such a reputation for their care of exposed infants that churches became the established site for abandoning infants” (Gosbell).

- b. Today it may look like serving with ministries like Teen Challenge that cares for the addicted, Real Options that cares for the unborn, or Foster the Bay that cares for the orphan.
  - i. In fact, I was just talking with Philip Pattison, the director of Foster the Bay, on Thursday. We were just catching up and it was neat to hear all that’s been going on. And one of the things he said stuck with me. He said, “Man, I’ll tell you. The way we’ve seen God provide and open doors and things. It’s just so obvious that this work is so close to God’s heart.”

D. And so the question I have for us is: Are we involved in this work? Are we doing this sort of thing? Are we dignifying what the world and culture around us may devalue?

## (2) Jesus Devalues What We Dignify (v. 17)

A. If Jesus is going to save us here, He’s going to have to not just dignify what we devalue, He’s going to have to devalue what we dignify. This comes out in particular there in v. 17: “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

- 1. Here we see that Jesus says we must not only be concerned for these little ones, we must actually become like them! Not only should we stop hindering them from coming to Jesus we should start learning from them how to come to Jesus!

- a. What a shock to the sensibilities this statement would have been, and still is in so many ways!

B. This really is why I opened the way that I did—with the talk of our tendency towards autonomy and self-sufficiency and independence. We dignify those people who get it done themselves, who have the strength to pull themselves up and make something for themselves—they’ve got the discipline, the drive, the muscle, the might. We value people that—in the world and in the church.

- 1. And Jesus is saying here: “I am not impressed.” Such man-centered nonsense will get you nowhere near the kingdom of God.

C. Now, there are two questions I want to ask of this verse: (1) What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God like a child? And (1) How does it happen? How do we become like children and so receive and enter the kingdom in this way?

### Question #1: What Does It Mean?

- A. The image of coming to Jesus like a baby, like a little child, here cuts in two directions, I think.
- B. On the one hand, and this is the harder for us to admit, it this idea points us towards the insufficiency of our own efforts and abilities. We can get nowhere with God in our own strength.

That's what this is saying. That's what it means to be a baby. I can't take care of myself. I have nothing but need. That's what the tax collector in the parable finally understood. And that is what we must come to understand or we are not yet ready to enter the kingdom of God.

1. You don't enter it by earning it. You enter it by receiving it. Did you catch that? *"Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (v. 17).* The way to enter it is to freely receive it. You don't flex your muscle. You open your hand.
  - a. Jesus doesn't say if you want in the kingdom you must become self-sufficient adults and pay your own way because I'm tired of covering for you.
  - b. Nor does He even say that we must become like adolescents, or teenagers, or something like this, where we can contribute a bit here and there and strike a decent balance between relying on God and getting things done ourselves.
  - c. No. He will have none of this. He says: "If you want the kingdom you must become as infants, as little children, totally dependent, openly aware of your own utter insufficiency." Until you get there, you're going nowhere.
- C. But that's just one direction this verse cuts. The other is far more encouraging. Because, while on the one hand, Jesus is saying we cannot earn the kingdom in our own strength, He is, on the other hand, expressing just how happy He is to freely give it. While He is here pointing to the insufficiency of our own efforts and abilities, He is at the same time pointing to the all-sufficiency of God's effort and ability on our behalf.
  1. That is the gold-plated truth in all of this. Yes, it hurts to say, "I can't," but what an amazing thing to come into the realization that He can and already has!
- D. This is, just to reiterate, what I was saying last week about the law not being a mountain to climb up to God but a muzzle whereby we are silenced with the recognition: "I can't get to God on the basis my own merit or righteousness."
  1. And in this we are made poor in spirit and readied to receive the riches of Christ and His righteousness. We see our need for the cross and we fling ourselves upon it.
    - a. *"Nothing in my hand I bring, / Simply to thy cross I cling; / Naked, come to thee for dress, / Helpless, look to thee for grace; / Foul, I to the Fountain fly; / Wash me, Saviour, or I die."*

## Question #2: How Does It Happen?

- A. But, now, how does it happen? How do we become like babies in this way and receive and enter the kingdom of God? I've got three things for us to consider here and we'll draw this to a close.

### (1) It Often Begins with Hardship and Trial

- A. Because we come out of the womb, it seems, thinking we've got it, we can figure it out, we usually need to be knocked off our horse a few times before we're willing to admit maybe don't have what it takes after all.

1. That's certainly how I came to the Lord. I imagine it's the same for many of you. Of course I thought of Paul the apostle at this point. He had to literally be thrown off his horse. He was blinded by the Lord so that he could see. He thought he was all good. He thought he was on God's team. And then He ends just saying: "My righteousness is trash. I need Christ."
- B. The tendency for us is to first look to ourselves for answers. And that's what the world is going to teach. I was in Target the other day and saw the new cover of the People magazine with Taylor Swift on it. And there in bold letters was this statement: "The Year I Found True Joy" with a little caption underneath: "I've leaned into who I really am."
1. You catch the message here, right? True joy, the world would say, is found not by looking out or up to God or Jesus or whatever, but by leaning into yourself. That sounds good, but it will eventually ring hollow. And it usually takes significant trial and suffering for us to finally give up the ghost on this and say, "Okay, maybe the answer isn't in me at all."

## (2) It Always Requires the Regenerating Work of the Spirit

- A. Regeneration is just a fancy theological word that refers to perhaps the more common idea of being "born again." If you've been around Christianity for any time at all, you've probably encountered this concept, but I thought it might prove helpful to see it in connection to our text this morning and the idea of receiving the kingdom of God like a child.
1. What does it mean to be born again but to become like a little child. It's just different language for the same idea.
- B. Listen to what Jesus says on this in [John 3](#) to the Pharisee Nicodemus: "<sup>3</sup>Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . <sup>5</sup>Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup>That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (vv. 3, 5-6).
1. The upshot here is simply this: Suffering and trial isn't enough in itself to humble us away from self-reliance and move us towards Jesus. We need the Spirit of God to convict and soften and awaken and cause us to be born again.
    - a. If we are not born again we cannot even see the kingdom. If we are not born of the Spirit we will never enter the kingdom. The Spirit of God comes in and enables us to do what we would never do on our own, in our flesh: namely, ask for mercy and forgiveness and help.
      - i. That's what Paul says the first thing the Spirit leads us to do is to cry out, like a baby: "Abba! Father" ([Rom 8:15](#); [Gal 4:6](#)). That's a newborn cry! And that's the result of the regenerating work of the Spirit.

## (3) It Ultimately Leads to Greater Dependence upon Jesus

- A. Now, I just wanted to end with this, because, though we might now see, hopefully, that we get into the kingdom of God by crying out for help like a little baby, we might still think that we go on from



there and grow as a Christian towards independence, as we do in our natural course of development.

1. But that it is to miss what I would call the inverse maturation process of the children of God. This is just a fancy way of saying: Maturity in the Christianity life doesn't trend towards greater and greater independence from God but rather towards greater and greater dependence upon Him.
- B. Listen, if you're the grown man still living in your parents' garage because you want to play video games all day and skirt responsibility and things, we look down on that. That's probably a problem. In the natural realm, adulthood, maturity, true growth and development trends towards independence, and if it doesn't, something's wrong.
1. But in the spiritual, all is upside-down. God does not want to see us press out from Him. He wants to help us press deeper into Him.
- C. That's why, for example, the Christian is called in numerous places in the NT to "pray without ceasing" (e.g. [1 Th 5:17](#)). We are supposed to be crying out, "Abba! Father!" not just at the beginning of our Christian lives but ever-increasingly and all the way through it!
1. Think about it. The reason I often fail to pray without ceasing is because I think I've got it. And then when I've exhausted my options, finally I go, "Whoops, I guess I should pray."
    - a. That is not maturity. That is a mark of my immaturity. That is exposing where I still need to grow as a Christian. That is the remnants of the flesh and the fallen nature. That is not an attitude that needs to be encouraged, but one that needs to be put to death.
      - i. True maturity in the Christian is breathing in and breathing out prayer and faith and reliance on God in everything for everything!
- D. So how do we become like little children ready to receive and, hence, enter the kingdom of God? (1) It Often Begins with Hardship and Trial; (2) It Always Requires the Regenerating Work of the Spirit; and (3) It Ultimately Leads to Greater Dependence upon Jesus.
- E. So where are you in all of this?
1. Maybe God is using trial to get your attention. Maybe you've been leaning in on yourself and He's trying to get you to lean out more and more on Him. That's where true joy is found. That's where the kingdom of God is experienced in greater measure.
    - a. So let's cry out to Him now!