

# **Jesus Blesses the Children**

**Scripture: Mark 10:13-16**

**By Pastor John H. Noordhof  
Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

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People of God: Two weeks ago, we dealt with the second petition of the Lord's Prayer: Your Kingdom Come. As we looked at some of the parables about the Kingdom, we discover two important truths.

First, the Kingdom of God is something very important. Like a fine pearl, which a person bought after selling everything else, so the Kingdom is so valuable that it is worth sacrificing everything in order to be part of the Kingdom. It's that important.

Second, the kingdom comes in a way that is not expected. While the Jews expected the kingdom of God to arrive on the scene in a dramatic change of events, Jesus said the kingdom is like a mustard seed, which starts out very small and obscure, but ends up being very large. The kingdom of God comes in a way that is not expected.

The Kingdom of God is vitally important, yet everything about the Kingdom is so different from how our world operates. This point is once again evident in our text for this morning. Jesus once again challenged the customs and expectations of his day, when he said:

Let the little children come to me and do hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And in making this point, Jesus once again underscores the gracious nature of the gospel.

The scene of Jesus blessing the little children is well known. It is often pictured as a very peaceful scene. In children's story Bibles or even as a separate print, you usually just see Jesus surrounded by children, with everyone having smiles. No lurking disciples with grim faces, who have just

been told off by their Master. No sense that Jesus had just been very angry. Even the parents are often missing. Just a happy, peaceful scene of Jesus surrounded by children.

Now the scene may have ended peacefully—after all, Jesus did bless the children—but it did not start off that way. In fact, it started off quite nastily. As children were being brought to Jesus, the disciples began to rebuke them. Now the word “rebuke” is a very strong word to be used. It used elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark to describe Jesus rebuking an evil spirit.

Now the disciples are rebuking—who? We automatically assume they rebuking the parents who were bringing the children for Jesus to bless. But the Greek is ambiguous. It can be read as if the disciples were rebuking the children. I can imagine both happening. The disciples were stopping the parents from approaching Jesus. But if there were a few kids that could walk, I can imagine the disciples chasing them away, like we might chase a dog away.

In response to the rebukes of the disciples, we read that Jesus became indignant. Again, that is a very strong term. To become indignant is to become angry, incensed, up in arms. It’s the only time in all the four gospels that Jesus is described as being indignant. Jesus boils over in anger over the actions of the disciples. As they say, what a person gets angry or passionate about reveals a great deal about that person.

Now how did we get to this point, the disciples rebuking parents and children, with Jesus responding with indignation? Well, it is very important for us to understand the role of children in the time of Jesus. Unlike today, where children, especially babies, are often the center of attention, in the days of Jesus children were not to be seen or heard. While today, it would be shocking if I refused to hold a baby, in NT times, such an action would have been considered below the dignity of a rabbi, a teacher like Jesus.

And so, the disciples were just doing what their culture expected. Children didn’t really count. Children should not bother a great teacher. The disciples thought they were acting as good gatekeepers, protecting Jesus from this worthless distraction. Jesus had more important things to do.

It’s like restricting access to an important politician. Sure politicians, especially at election time, will shake hand with anyone, and kiss a lot of babies. But it’s all carefully orchestrated. Does the average citizen really have access to people in power? Can you get a visit in with the Prime Minister or with President Obama?

Do you think a person who owns a few shares can really talk to the CEO of a multinational corporation? Do you really think that a fundraiser

for a multi-billion dollar project will spend any time with a street-person? Do you think a farmer peasant in China will be able to change the government's appropriation of his land? In our world, many people are cut off from the halls of power.

But not in the kingdom of God. In Kingdom of God, the ways of the world are turned upside down. The kingdom Jesus announced didn't operate like the Roman Empire. The Romans conquered through brute force, but Jesus conquered the enemies of God—sin, death, and the devil, through suffering and his own death. And in the kingdom, there are to be no debates about who is more important than others. In the kingdom, people are not excluded merely because of who they are—including their age.

That's why Jesus gets so indignant and frustrated. He's being trying to get his disciples to understand that in the kingdom of God things are done differently than in the sinful world. You see, the disciples should have known better.

In the previous chapter, the disciples were arguing over who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. How would they rank in the kingdom of God? Just as we like to rank sports teams and sports players, so the disciples wanted to know their rank in Christ's Kingdom.

But Jesus overturns our notions of greatness. "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all." In order to illustrate this point, Jesus takes a child in his arms and says "Whoever welcomes one these little children in my name welcomes me." As a result, Jesus already told his disciples that not only does he welcomes children, they need to as well.

But that lesson didn't seem to sink in as, instead of welcoming these children, they are rebuking the parents for sending them. As a result, Jesus becomes indignant and sets them straight—once again. He says: "*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*"

With these words, Jesus not only establishes a welcoming attitude towards children, an attitude that broke the social customs of his time, Jesus also explains a basic principle of what is required in entering the kingdom of God.

First of all, entering the kingdom is through him. Sometimes this aspect is overlooked because of the second aspect, entering like little children. But let's not forget this first aspect. Entering the kingdom is through him. Throughout the gospel, Jesus makes the invitation: Come to me. In coming to Jesus, we can be part of the Kingdom of God. We can be

part of the renewal of creation, the restoration of a broken world. It happens through Jesus.

Hear the invitation this morning: Come to me. It isn't just an invitation for children, but for all of us. Come, with your sin and shortcomings and receive the forgiveness of the Lord. Come, with your struggles and receive the encouragement that you need. Come, with the brokenness of your life and receive the wholeness that only Jesus Christ can bring. Enter the kingdom of God, with all of its blessings and joys.

But how are we to come? Jesus says: Like a child. *"I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."* But what does this mean? How are we to become like little children?

Many people look to the virtues that children possess and assume that these qualities or virtues of children are what Jesus wants in his disciples. In particular, children are often praised for their simple faith. They just accept what their parents tell them. They accept what the church teaches. They sing, "Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells so" with a simple and sincere faith. It is this type of simple faith—a basic trust in Jesus, uncluttered with doubt, untainted with the struggles of life—that Jesus commends here.

While that sounds right, I don't think that's the point Jesus is making. Jesus does not here point to any virtues in the children brought to him. He doesn't say have the faith of a child. He just points to the children themselves. These children were very young—in Luke's gospel they are described as babies. Jesus is talking about someone like Gabriel. Receive the kingdom like him.

Obviously with a child as young as Gabriel, we're not talking about simple faith to be modeled. In this story, children are blessed, not because of any virtue they may have, like simple faith, instead, they are blessed for what they lack. They come to Jesus, only as they are—small, helpless, without any power and ability. A young child is completely needy, completely dependent upon others. They come—in the days of Jesus—as those who are overlooked, as those who had no say. A little child has nothing to bring to Jesus, and whatever he receives from him is out of grace.

Do you see now, how a young child like Gabriel can be a model for how we receive the kingdom of God? We need to come to Jesus, as we really are—spiritually needy. Left to our own devices, we would sin and wander away from God. We enter the kingdom as those who have nothing to bring—there is no merit in ourselves for which Christ must open the door—not even faith, which is a gift of God. Like a baby, we come to God as those who are completely needy, as those who are completely dependent upon the

Lord. We are like this helpless baby. And God, in his mercy and love, takes us into his arms. He enfolds us into the kingdom, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

This passage is mentioned in the form for baptism. And while these verses do not directly support the case for infant baptism, they do provide a strong indirect support for this practice. John Calvin argued that if children were brought to Jesus to receive the kingdom, which is part of the promises sealed in baptism, then why should they be denied the sign of baptism?

In the baptism of children, we have a visible expression of the actions of Jesus. Baptism is an act of God. It is sign of God's grace. God has made the first and most important move in saving lost humanity. In baptism, God blesses this child. It is a sign that we enter the kingdom, without any merit of our own.

The kingdom of God is vitally important. We need to enter it. We need to receive it. The kingdom comes through Jesus. But how that kingdom is received and expressed is vastly different than the ways of the world. In the kingdom of God, we are received not because of anything we have done, or because of the greatness of who we are. Instead, we are received into the kingdom because of what Jesus has done for us in his death and resurrection. We enter it, like a child, without any merit of our own, but through the grace of God. Amen.