

Jesus and Children

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Date: 22 May 2022

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 0 0] Well, abortion has been on the news recently because of a leaked US Supreme Court opinion, and it appears that the Supreme Court in the States is set to overturn the Roe versus Wade ruling, which currently allows abortion to take place. And so the fierce pro-life versus pro-choice debate seems to have brought all the main issues to the fore again, like the central issue in the abortion debate, which is on whether the fetus is an actual person. Of course, Christians believe the teaching of the Bible is clear on this, personhood begins at and continues from the moment of conception. And that's why Christianity has always valued children, whether born or unborn, whether outside the womb or inside the womb. Children are valuable in Christianity. And so we see how Jesus teaches about the value of children from this very short Bible reading that we've had in Mark chapter 10. And so the question is, well, what should we think about children? And what can we learn from children about what it means to follow Jesus? Well, our passage answers both of these questions. And so this episode, as we've discovered, is part of a lengthy section in the central chapters of the Gospel of Mark. And it's a section that's all about discipleship. Jesus is teaching his disciples and us what it means to follow him. And so as children are brought to Jesus here, Jesus not only welcomes them to himself, but he uses them to illustrate what it means to be a part of the kingdom of God. He uses them as an example. And so we're going to look at this passage under three simple headings. They're up on the screen. First, Jesus welcomes. Second, children belong. And third, everyone must receive. Jesus welcomes. Children belong. Everyone must receive.

So first of all, Jesus welcomes. Now the disciples, we've seen this before, the disciples were slow to understand. Jesus had already taught them about welcoming children. If you just skip back to chapter 9, 36 verse 37. Remember, they'd been arguing about who was the greatest. And so what did Jesus do?

Jesus picked up a child in his arms and said, whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. But they still hadn't learned the lesson because we read in verse 13, people were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.

Now the people bringing the children were presumably their parents. And Mark uses the masculine pronoun here, indicating that it was fathers as well as mothers. And they were probably infants here because Jesus took them in his arms. I don't know when you stop taking a child in your arms. Age 12, definitely.

But down from that, I'm not quite sure when you stop being able to hold a child. So these are small children. In fact, in the same episode in Luke's gospel, Luke uses a different word than the word here for little children. He uses the word for babies. Luke chapter 18, verse 15. So infants, babies, small children, and the parents bring them to Jesus for Jesus to touch them, for Jesus to bless them.

[3 : 31] But what the disciples want to do? Well, the disciples want to send them away. Now in ancient societies, we thought about this before, there wasn't the same affection for children back then as we have for children today. Back then, children had no rights. They had no power, no status. They were the least important members of society. They were the bottom of the social pile. And that's probably why the disciples don't want Jesus to be bothered by all these kids. Jesus is too important. These children are unimportant, so just keep them apart from one another.

Jesus had far more important things to do. And so the disciples are saying, well, to the parents, do you really think Jesus should be bothered with your kids getting in his way, stopping him doing what he needs to do? Just go away. That's the strength of feeling here from the disciples. We read the disciples, the disciples rebuked them. And it's a really strong word that Mark uses. In fact, in the original, it's the word that describes what Jesus does to demons. He rebukes them. Check out chapter 9, verse 25, for example. So strong feeling here by the disciples towards those who simply want Jesus to bless their children. But it just shows how much these disciples don't really understand or get Jesus.

But just look at Jesus' reaction because it is also strong. Verse 14, when Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He was indignant. Again, a really strong word. It means to arouse to anger. But not just that, it means to express that anger outwardly. Now, when you and I are angry, we probably feel the anger simmering, bubbling away inside of us. And hopefully it doesn't spill out and then people see it.

But with Jesus here, the disciples were in no doubt how angry he was with them because it showed. In fact, this is the only time Jesus is said to be indignant. That's the strength of his feeling.

And so the disciples had completely misjudged this situation. They're behaving like nightclub bouncers, aren't they? But instead of chucking out the rowdy drunks, the people they're chucking out are the small children. Totally out of step with the values of the kingdom of God. That's the disciples.

[6 : 10] They needed to grasp, didn't they, that Jesus welcomed those who were regarded as the last and the least. That's why Jesus said to them in verse 14, let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Why did Jesus want the little children to come to him? Because he loved them and he still does. There's that retro children's song and it might be a bit sentimental, but it's spot on. It's true. Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. And so before we move on, it's worth asking ourselves how much we are in step with the values of Jesus's kingdom. How much do we value little children? Because from these verses, one way to gauge it is by the way that we see our children, how we see them at home as parents or how we see them in church. How much do we long for God to bless our children? And what are we doing about it? And so if we're a parent, are we doing what's best to lead our children to Jesus? How do we do it? Well, by teaching them about Jesus from the Bible, reading the Bible to them and with them, encouraging them to read the Bible for themselves because that's where they will find and meet Jesus. And by praying for them and praying with them and by example, trying to help them see what it means to live for and follow Jesus. And that's the best way to love our children, isn't it? It isn't to put them to the best schools or to give them the best games console,

Xbox, PS5, whatever it is, but it is to, by prayer, by teaching, by example, to help them come and discover who Jesus is and what he has done for them. That's taking them to Jesus as it were in God's word, showing them Jesus. And so while we seek to help them, of course, we need to be careful not to hinder them in any way because children are like wet cement, aren't they? They're impressionable.

They will take in anything that they see or hear. And so there are implications here for those of us who are parents, but there are also implications for us here in our church. And it's fantastic to have a growing number of children in Christchurch, Glasgow. And I love seeing children every week.

I love them running in the door with their toys, with their noise. Sometimes they have to be patient and accept the noise. If you want to hear noise, go down to Explorers and you'll hear real noise, what's affectionately known as the madhouse. But it's great. It's great having children.

Churches are closing because they don't have any children. But children are always welcome, aren't they? They are part of our church family. And so preparing this message this week, I was reminded just how vital our children's work is, how vital our youth work is. And so for those of you who are from the States who are here thinking of youth work and children's ministry, it's great because you're teaching and helping shape young lives to follow Jesus. And so all our children's ministries here are significant. And sometimes we think, well, it's the creche. I don't really bother about the creche or it's explorers. They're tiny. What are they going to pick up or learn? And we think, well, the great things we need to do are start a parent and toddlers group or we need to go and evangelize the whole of Northwest Glasgow. We've got big plans for all the rest of it. And yet children's work, children's ministry is significant. Because at Christchurch Glasgow, we do talk a lot about obeying the Great Commission. And we should, because obeying the Great Commission is to go and make disciples of all nations. And of course, that is what we should be doing. We should go and make disciples. Absolutely. Reach people out there who aren't here. That's what the church is called to do.

[10 : 21] But what about the little children who are here every week? Those who are brought here by their parents. The disciple-making process starts with them here in our church. God has given us these children.

They are precious to Jesus. And so we are to make disciples of them. That's the first point, Jesus welcomes. Second point is Jesus, sorry, Jesus welcomes. Secondly, children belong.

So verse 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. So the kingdom of God arrived in Jesus. It's already here. So it's being established on this earth. But the kingdom of God is not quite here in all its fullness. So it's already, but it's not yet. It's still to come.

And that's why we pray, your kingdom come in the Lord's Prayer. And so because Jesus is the king of his kingdom, then he is the one who decides who belongs to it. And here he declares, little children are in. They're not outsiders. They're insiders. And so that's why we shouldn't jump too quickly from verse 14 to verse 15, as if Jesus is only saying one thing here. We'll come to verse 15 in a moment where Jesus tells us how to receive the kingdom of God. But here he says, the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. So who are these? Well, it's got to be the actual little children with him, the infants, the babies he picks up and holds in his arms, as well as other children and those like them.

So Jesus can't be saying here, the kingdom of God belongs to people like these, like these children, children, but not actually these specific children. That's not what he's saying. For example, a school teacher, head teacher might say in the staff room over coffee to one of his colleagues, might say, we really need more teachers like her in our school. What does he mean? It means we need that particular teacher and we need other teachers like her. Not other teachers like her, but it doesn't really matter if we've got her or we don't have her, but her and those like her. She is included in the type of teacher that's needed and would be good for the school. And so when you hear what Jesus is saying here, he's saying the kingdom of God belongs to the children right in front of him, these children and such as these. These infants, even though they are too little to exercise any faith themselves, they belong to the kingdom of God. They are part of it. They aren't excluded until they're old enough to understand. No, they belong now. Insiders, not outsiders. They inherit. They don't have to earn it.

[13 : 29] And so it clearly can't be about their faith because they're too small to have any faith. It's all about grace. And isn't that how any of us belong to the kingdom of God?

So here, Jesus says, these little children who are brought by the faith of their parents, parents who want Jesus to do something for their children, these children belong to the kingdom of God.

Now, of course, this doesn't mean, and Jesus isn't saying, that our children are automatically saved, that they have salvation just because they're children. He's not saying that, is he?

Because all people, all people, all of us, including our children, need to have a personal faith in Jesus that is living and active and grows. And that's why we need to teach our children the values of the kingdom so that they will learn how to live as people who belong to that kingdom. But what Jesus is saying is that the kingdom of God here belongs to these children. And that's why Jesus takes them in his arms and he blesses them. Verse 16, and he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. Now, in the Bible, if you read the Bible, blessing is a big deal, a big thing.

And it's worth saying that because the idea of blessing today doesn't carry the same significance as it does in the Bible. So we might say, bless you. When somebody sneezes, we might, at the end of a letter or an email, put every blessing. You might hear somebody say, ah, bless, which is a sort of sympathetic, condescending kind of, hmm, shame for you. But that's not the kind of blessing that the Bible speaks of. It's not just offering good wishes. It is basically the best thing that could happen to somebody. In the Bible, what is the opposite of blessing? It's curse, isn't it?

[15 : 29] So blessing is great. The opposite is bad. And so receiving God's blessing was hugely significant. It was to be called by God's name. It was to be one of God's people. It was to be included in God's covenant and all of its promises. One of the most famous blessings in the Bible comes from Numbers chapter 6.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace. So the blessing of these children was a big deal. God was their God and they belonged to God's people, even though they didn't know it yet.

And we might wonder how this can be. Well, just listen to these amazing words from Psalm 22. Yet you brought me out of the womb. You made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.

From birth, I was cast on you. From my mother's womb, you have been my God. Isn't that amazing that God's inclusion of people under his covenant would include children sucking at their mother's breast, even before that in the womb?

Now, Jesus' words here about children are partly why we would baptize children in our church. Now, we're not saying this passage is about infant baptism. It's not about infant baptism, is it? It's about blessing.

[17 : 11] And there is a wider biblical theology about covenant baptism. But I think my friend and colleague Dave Gibson, he gets this spot on when he says, these verses are not about infant baptism, but infant baptism is about these verses.

So these verses are not about infant baptism, but infant baptism is about these verses. And that's why you'll hear these verses being read again in a couple of weeks when Caleb Thurlwell will be at the front and he will be baptized.

And his children, sorry, his parents will take vows promising that they will bring Caleb up to know and love Jesus. Now, of course, not everybody takes this view of baptism, and that's fine.

We're not going to fall out. That is just how it is. And in fact, C.H. Spurgeon, who is a great Baptist preacher, he's got a sermon which apparently was preached in 1864.

I don't think anyone was around then to hear it. But this is what his sermon was called. It was called Children. It was on this passage. Children brought to Christ, not the font. Children brought to Christ, not the... Can you guess what his sermon was about? Any ideas?

[18 : 23] Well, I prefer what John Calvin has to say because this is what he says in his Institutes. He says, If it is right for infants to be brought to Christ, why not also to be received into baptism, the symbol of our communion and fellowship with Christ?

If the kingdom of heaven belongs to them, why is the sign denied, which, so to speak, opens them a door into the church? That, adopted into it, they may be enrolled among the heirs of the kingdom of heaven.

So he is saying, John Calvin, if Jesus welcomes little children, if Jesus declares the kingdom of God belongs to them, and if Jesus blesses them, blessing being greater than baptism, if Jesus does all of this, then why shouldn't we administer the sign that symbolizes all of this to our children?

Sign, namely being baptism. Because, of course, we want our children to be included in the blessings of God's covenant promises for his people, don't we? Of course we do.

We want them to know that God is our God and God is their God. What is the greatest desire of our hearts and our earnest prayer for our children?

[19 : 43] It's that they would trust in Jesus. It's that they would follow Jesus all their days and that they would come to inherit the kingdom that belongs to them as children of the covenant.

And so whatever you think about infant baptism, can you see that children born to believing parents are in a special and privileged position?

And that's why it's so wonderful to have children grow up from a very young age to trust in Jesus and to follow him. Almost to never know a time when they didn't trust in Jesus.

They don't need to have had a dramatic conversion after a life of sex, drugs, rock and roll, maybe even a prison sentence, bonus points, prison sentence, and then being converted.

They don't need to have gone through all of that to have assurance that they really belong to Jesus. Praise God if that is their story, fantastic story, drink, drugs, rock and roll, prison sentence, Jesus.

[20 : 49] But equally, praise God if their coming to Jesus has been the most natural thing in the world because they have been brought up in a home where their mum and their dad profess Jesus to be saviour and lord.

And they make that their profession too. So Jesus welcomes, first of all, second, children belong. And thirdly, finally, everyone must receive. So verse 14, okay, we've got that.

Jesus says the kingdom belongs to little children. Now what does he say? He says the kingdom must be received like a little child. So verse 15 says, Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never inherit it.

So how do you receive the kingdom of God like a child? What does Jesus mean? Well, Jesus isn't saying that you've got to be childish. It's never a good thing. I've tried it. It doesn't work.

Nor is he suggesting that children are innocent and pure and good. And so be like children who are innocent and pure and good. Anyone who's ever had children knows children aren't innocent and pure and good.

[22 : 01] They're not little angels. So Jesus is not saying anything like this. So how do we enter the kingdom of God? The answer is that we receive.

We receive. That's the sense in which we are to be like a child. Because if we never receive the kingdom of God like a child, Jesus says we never enter it. Because if God's kingdom belongs to children and such like them, then we can never enter unless we receive it as children do.

Now remember just how children were viewed in Jesus' society. No status, no rights, no power. Completely dependent on other people to meet their needs.

And we get that, don't we? Children have nothing. Children receive everything. And that's Jesus' point here. A little child is weak and helpless.

They need their parents to do every single thing for them. Children are utterly dependent on their parents. To be fed, cared for, clothed, changed, carried.

[23 : 08] Everything. They need everything to be done for them. And so notice how Jesus expresses his words here in a negative way. He says, will not receive and then will never enter.

It's because we need to be humbled to the extent that we recognize that like a child, we desperately need help. We can't do anything for ourselves.

Because we'll never receive or enter the kingdom of God if we think we can earn it. Or if we think we deserve it. And yet as adults, I think that is how we are conditioned to think, isn't it?

If we work hard, then we've earned it. And so we are entitled to it. And so we can sometimes struggle when we're given something that we haven't earned for ourselves.

Like at Christmas time. When somebody gives you that unexpected present on Christmas Eve and you didn't get a present for them. And you think, oh. It's because we're not good at receiving.

[24 : 09] We feel we need to justify ourselves by doing something or giving something in return. But children never have that problem, do they? Never. They're always happy to receive.

Always happy to take. They know that they can't repay. And of course, we're not expecting them to either. So Jesus says, that's how we are to receive the kingdom of God.

Remember the L'Oreal shampoo adverts? A woman, massive hair, in a shower, L'Oreal shampoo, shiny hair. And the tagline, the strap line of the advert was, because I'm worth it.

By the way, don't buy L'Oreal shampoo. I've used it. My hair has never turned out like any of those people in the adverts, as you can see. But that strap line, because I'm worth it, is the very opposite of what Jesus is saying here.

Because if we're going to receive the kingdom of God, we will have to swallow our pride and admit our unworthiness. Only when we recognize that we have got nothing to give at all, are we then ready in a position to receive.

[25 : 20] So Jesus uses children to illustrate what it means to be part of God's kingdom. Because our entry in is an unmerited and undeserved gift of sheer grace.

And that's why little children who have nothing to give and can only receive are the perfect model for what it means to come to Jesus Christ.

Because it's grace. It's through what Jesus has done. It's not what we do or can do or can offer. We have got nothing to give to God.

I guess some of us maybe think we're special. Maybe we've got more to give than other people. But really, we have got nothing to give to God. We must receive. And we must receive his salvation and his kingdom as a gift.

We're entirely dependent on God for our salvation. Just like a tiny baby is dependent on their parents for everything.

[26 : 22] I think the old hymn puts it well. Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling. So it's only those who realize they can do nothing to merit the kingdom of God will inherit the kingdom of God.

And that's why Christianity, we speak about it being a gospel of grace. The good news of grace. Where you don't have to achieve to belong to the kingdom of God. You only need to receive.

Just like Jesus took the little children in his arms. So we need to be picked up and carried into the kingdom of God like a child. Because we can never get there ourselves by anything we do.

And how does this happen? Well, we can only receive the kingdom of God because the Son of God gave his life for us. Jesus said these words here.

He was willing to be God forsaken on the cross so that we can be welcomed into God's kingdom forever.

[27 : 35] Later on in Galatians chapter 3, it speaks of Jesus becoming a curse for us. So that God's blessing might be ours. It's an exchange.

Jesus in our place. He takes the curse. We get the blessing. And so Jesus has done for us what we can never do for ourselves. To give us blessing we don't deserve.

And guess what? It is on offer to you today. And all you have to do is simply receive. Receive it all as a free, undeserved gift.

Paid for by the death and blood of Jesus. Jesus welcomes all people who recognize they are weak and helpless as a child.

For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. The Romans wants a blessing.

[28 : 48] But if we don't need it.