

A Kingdom of Children

Mark 10:13-16

The disciples still with Jesus at this point in His ministry had heard many difficult words about the cost of entering the kingdom of God. Jesus had spoken often of His death. The Twelve would have been a bit worn-down by the gravity of it all. But now, just when Jesus had made entry into His kingdom sound like the hardest thing in the world, He abruptly made it sound like something that even a child could do. In fact, He made it sound like something that *ONLY* a child can do.

The July 28, 2006 edition of *USA Today* reported on a business trend of executives escaping the stress of work by attending camps like California's Camp GetAway, where:

“an adult can participate in sing-alongs, water balloon fights, kickball, s'mores around the campfire, and a sneaky excursion out of the cabin to toilet-paper the cars and cabins of other campers.”
- Kitty Bean Yancey

Sound like a possibility for a men's retreat? Surely, Jesus had something more in mind when He said, “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

What does Jesus love about the childlike spirit? After many exhausting and dangerous dealings with the "holier-than-thou" in the land, and after nearly three years of attempting to fashion godly leaders out of men who seemed chronically carnal and ambitious, Jesus now presents some character of a child as the true ticket into His kingdom. But, first, let us consider ...

I. The Tedium of a Grown-Up Duty to Jesus (13)

¹³People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them.

A. The Disciples Were Probably Just Being Protective of Jesus

People typically flocked to Jesus whenever He was near. Moments of respite were few and far between for Him. It was also common for parents to bring small children to be blessed by any popular rabbi. The demands on Jesus' time were always heavy. It is unfair simply to dismiss the disciples as stuffy. Most likely, they were just trying to do the right thing as they understood it.

Bear in mind as well the things that these men were trying to process mentally. Jesus, in Whom they had placed their hopes for the restored kingdom of Israel, was convinced that He must die in Jerusalem at the hands of the Jewish authorities. Whether or not they believed this could really happen, Jesus believed it. Whether or not the shadow of a cross was looming over the Twelve, they knew that it was looming over Jesus. They had been obsessed with their own ambitions and with forging their own legacies. Jesus had spoken words to them that were quite stinging.

By now, the Twelve felt a sense of profound duty to their Friend. He needed rest. He needed to reflect. In their minds, He may have even needed time to clear His head regarding this path He seemed determined to walk. What was clear, however, was that Jesus did not need to be further distracted by a swarm of hyper-active grimy little hands and runny noses. I can understand how twelve men loyal to Jesus might want to “shoo away” the kiddoes. As one bumper-sticker says: "I child-proofed my home like the safety experts say, but they are still getting in!"

B. Still, the Disciples Were Quite Unperceptive

These men should have known better. Regardless of the demands on His time or the pressures that His enemies placed on Him, Jesus came to serve people. He got away when He needed to. He was the most balanced man the disciples had ever met. He called them to learn from Him, not to manage His calendar. Good intentions aside, they should have paid closer attention to how He interacted with people. This was not the first time Jesus had used a child to make His point:

³⁶He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him 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." – Mark 9:36, 37

We should fuss over those who have no standing in this world's eyes as though they are honored dignitaries. The Twelve constantly feuded amongst themselves over which of them should be the greatest in Jesus' kingdom. They were obsessed with status. They should have been obsessed with service. They should have been overwhelmed by the simple joy of being with Jesus.

C. It Doesn't Take Long for a Raw Sense of Duty to Christ to Smother the Relationship

A sense of duty to Jesus is good. In fact, He requires it. But, we are creatures prone to all sorts of imbalances in our lives. One such imbalance occurs whenever our sense of duty in serving Jesus overwhelms our need to abide in Him. We can find ourselves laboring in our own strength to no real end. We may try to win an unbeliever with too many words. We may try to turn a wayward child with too many demands. We may try to awaken a sleeping church with too much noise.

There comes a point when we must grasp that we are neither world-changers nor heart-changers. We simply work for One Who is both. There are times when we talk too much and strive too much. There are times when the greater act of faith is to stop chattering and to trust the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God to seal our arguments and efforts. There are even times when rather than to serve Christ, it is more useful to be renewed in Him. I think that is what was at the heart of a familiar story from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus was visiting the home of two sisters. While Martha was clanking about the kitchen, Mary just sat at Jesus' feet:

... She (Martha) came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴²but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." – Luke 10:40-42

Adults have a pretty good handle on working for those in authority over them, but children have much to teach us about loving those in authority over us no matter how well or incompetently we work alongside them. Jesus wants your labor, but not at the expense of your companionship.

II. The Treasure of a Child-like Delight in Jesus (14, 15)

... ¹⁴When 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. ¹⁵I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

What is it about little children that make them model citizens in the Kingdom of God?

A. Childlike Faith

A child's faith is thoroughly trusting. I wish I could take back all that the times that something simply good happened to me, and I felt the need to process the matter through my doctrine so that I could be sure that it was from God. After all, if a thing is from God, should there not be something profoundly purposeful in His giving it? Sure there is, but sometimes, He just purposes to let us know that He likes us. Children don't evaluate blessings. They don't worry about tomorrow. They simply expect their parents to meet their needs – not in a presumptuous spirit. They just don't have any experience with their parents failing to provide what is needed.

B. Childlike Obedience

Generally speaking, small children are obedient. They are moldable. Now, I know (and trust me when I say, "I know") that not every child is immediately obedient on every occasion. Still, unless parents are simply dropping the ball in matters of discipline, a child knows that rebellion has a price. They understand Mom and Dad's word to be law. They know that they break parental law at their own peril. That's not perfect obedience, but I suspect that it is a far keener sense of authority than many adults demonstrate as they recklessly ignore their heavenly Father's laws.

C. Childlike Forgiveness

Many human parents have no sense of justice. They impose manners on their kids. They forbid vices. They make kids eat things they don't like. They punish bad language. Then, they behave as rudely, as crudely, and as self-indulgently as they please. But, little ones forgive us. They forgive the siblings that bully them. They forgive the kid that they were at war with ten minutes ago.

God calls us to be forgiving as He Himself is forgiving. Once, when Peter was looking for a pat on the back, he asked Jesus: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). We know that was the wrong answer. We've read the story in Bible School. The correct answer is "seventy-seven times." We shake our heads in amazement at nutty ol' Peter. He never could keep his foot out of his mouth.

In the meantime, examine yourself. Think! Beyond the parameters of your own family – child, spouse, sibling or parent – who have you *EVER* forgiven seven times? How about four times? Is there anyone you have never forgiven once? Then, for Pete's sake, leave Pete alone. If we want to see how far short of the divine standard of graciousness we fall, we must look to the children.

D. Childlike Honesty

As a safety reminder, the second-grade class was being advised by their teacher to check the smoke alarms at home to see if they were operating. "Oh, I know ours works," one little girl assured her teacher. "My mom tests it every time she cooks."

Children tend to speak in terms of "Yes!" and "No!" They speak their minds with little regard to how speechless or embarrassed they render Mom or Dad. They haven't learned little word games or how to subtly "fish" for information. They speak as Jesus taught all of us to speak.

E. Childlike Wonder

Little ones are easily excited. A young family moved from the farm into town. Very early on the first Saturday in the new house, the five-year-old ran into his parents' bedroom to wake them up. He was still on farm time. Mom dressed him and told him to play in the yard. About 20 minutes later, he came running back. "Mommy, Mommy," he exclaimed, "everybody has doorbells - and they all work!"

Grown-ups often live in gray, tired worlds because we bury thoughts of the nearness of Jesus in many areas of our lives. Children, on the other hand, are filled with a sense of the presence of God. While the chief priests and scribes of the Jewish people were constantly suspicious of and threatened by Jesus, the children saw Him for who He was. In fact, on one occasion, these pious men took Jesus to task because children were shouting: "Hosanna to the Son of David ..."

¹⁶"Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him.

"Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read,
"From the lips of children and infants
you have ordained praise'?" - Matthew 2:16

A father and daughter were flying cross-country from New York to Los Angeles. The little girl kept looking out the window and exclaiming: Daddy, Daddy, there's a river ... Look, Daddy, there's a farm ... and a barn. Daddy, Daddy, look at that hill down there ... and there's a beautiful pond with all sorts of ducks in it. The father was busy reading a book, and kept repeating "Uh, huh, uh, huh!" until he became a little embarrassed by his daughter's excited chatter. Finally he turned to the passengers seated nearby and apologized: Please forgive my daughter. She still thinks everything is wonderful."

But, for whom should he apologize? A child filled with wonder at a world God has made, or a parent too engrossed in the frivolous pursuits of life to appreciate God's handiwork?

III. The Tenderness of a Christ-like Devotion for the Least of These (14a, 16)

A. Jesus' Anger Gives Us an Essential Glimpse into His Heart verse 14a

In reference to Jesus' response as the disciples turned the children away:

... ¹⁴When Jesus saw this, he was indignant ...

We struggle with an angry Jesus. It seems so out of character. Perhaps, Mark uses some special word that always refers to "righteous indignation." Sorry, here "indignant" just means violently grieved or severely irritated. I'm violently grieved and severely irritated all the time, but I'm a bit uncomfortable with Jesus being violently grieved or severely irritated.

We are created in God's image, and Jesus revealed that unmarred image to us. It turns out that Jesus, His Father and the rest of us all get violently grieved and severely irritated. What makes us uncomfortable with an angry Jesus is our sin. We don't understand perfect anger, because sin has flawed our emotions. Hence, we are seldom angry about the right things and usually angry about the wrong things. Jesus was always angry at the right things and never angry at the wrong things. If the biblical term for indignation is no help, perhaps, we should look at the biblical circumstances that call forth indignation. What made Jesus mad? What made everyone else mad?

This same word was used of the ten Apostles who lacked the audacity of the mother of James and John when she openly campaigned for her little darlings to win the top positions in Christ's kingdom. Theirs was not righteous indignation. They wanted those positions for themselves. The word is used of the chief priests and the teachers of the law when they heard those children praising Jesus. This was not righteous indignation. It was spiritual blindness peppered with a touch of envy. This word referred to the disciples who judged that a woman pouring a costly jar of perfume over the Lord's feet was bad stewardship. This was not righteous indignation. They were simply too unfeeling to recognize the sacrifice of a broken heart. This word referred to the ire of a synagogue ruler who fussed when Jesus healed a crippled woman on the Sabbath. This was hardly righteous indignation, for to him, if God's Law oppressed people, that was just fine.

But, when the word is applied to Jesus, it reflects the essence of righteous indignation. Men who should have known Jesus' heart and who would soon represent Him were in fact misrepresenting Him, frustrating loving parents and hindering His exposure to those He wanted near to Him. One thing that makes Jesus angry is when, allegedly in His Name, we hinder others from experiencing the outpouring of His tenderness

B. Jesus' Response to the Children Was More than Was Asked For verse 16

... ¹⁶And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

Jesus' words were a subtle correction of the Twelve compared to what He did next: "he took the children in his arms ..." Parents took their children to a rabbi to receive a simple verbal blessing. They did not expect the great man to embrace their little ones like this. Only after Jesus embraced them, after He conspicuously demonstrated His affection for them, did He do the expected rabbinical thing of putting a hand on them and blessing them. And, the word for blessing here is an intensified form of a verb in a continuous action tense. In other words, Jesus blessed them fervently, enthusiastically, and He did so over and over again. Mommies were delighted.

At an early age, children can learn to sing, "*Jesus loves me, this I know, For the Bible tells me so.*" Classic song, but that's not why they know that Jesus loves them. They know because faithful Christian workers and parents impart that truth to them long before they ever learn to read. At least, that was the world in which I grew up. But, we inhabit a harsher world today. Too many children don't know that they are important to anyone, least of all, to God, and there are far too few laborers in the fields to tell them.

I'm not recruiting for children's ministry this morning. We're staffed for the moment, though, if such a ministry is on your heart, let me know. I just want to challenge you to interact with a child this week. It is a thoroughly Jesus-like thing to do. Besides, it's good training for your inevitable interactions with other "little ones" who may be fully-aged chronologically, but who are still in desperate need of an embrace and a blessing from Jesus. Is there anyone that you have been hindering in anyway from experiencing the tenderness of Christ? That angers Jesus, so knock it off.

The great Greek philosopher Plato had a renowned academy in Athens. Over the entrance was a sign that said: "Let no one enter here who does not possess a knowledge of geometry." Plato made it crystal clear that not everyone was welcome to sit under his tutelage. Jesus, on the other hand, posts a different and more welcoming greeting over the gate to His kingdom. It says:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. – Matthew 11:28

This week, represent Christ in as welcoming a way as you can – to real children, but also to all those of little standing in this world who need an encounter with the tenderness of Jesus.

© 2007 by R. Karl Crouch, 2183 Veumont Drive, Lancaster, PA 17601