

Like a Child

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on April 19, 2020.

Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” And he laid his hands on them and went away (Matthew 19:13–15).¹

Jesus had many demands for his attention. From the adversarial Pharisees to the curious followers, from the sick and suffering to the opportunists, from the devoted to the disciples, people wanted Jesus’ undivided attention. This led Jesus’ disciples to mistakenly deduce that Jesus had no time for anything other than the urgent or what they perceived as important. In this way of thinking, children are an interruption. What could children contribute to Jesus’ ministry?

Like a security detail, they order the people to remove the distraction so that Jesus may get on with more important ministry matters. But for Jesus, the children are the important ministry matters. Rather than rebuke, Jesus invites: “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them.” The children are brought and blessed. It is a sweet time of tenderness as Jesus lays his gracious hands upon each child. And in his tenderness, he also teaches: “for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

Why does Jesus add this to his invitation to bless the children? What does he mean by using children as an example of those to whom God’s kingdom belongs? What does it mean to be like a child in the kingdom of heaven? In answering these questions, I want us to consider this passage from two perspectives: Jesus’ actions and his words.

Welcomed Like a Child

In keeping with a traditional Hebrew blessing, parents bring their children to Jesus “that he might lay his hands on them and pray.” Despite his disciples’ attempted intervention, Jesus welcomes the children. The Gospel of Mark says that Jesus “took them in his arms and blessed them” (Mark 10:16). Rather than an interruption, children are “a gift of the LORD” (Ps. 127:3 NASB). And so, Jesus welcomes the children as blessings from God that he might bless them.

Like children, Jesus welcomes all who would come to him through the free offer of the gospel. Jesus welcomed “all who labor and are heavy laden” to come to him and find his provision of rest. Christ’s welcome to all is *not* an invitation to bring your good works, your best behavior, your religiosity to him. His welcome is “to such as these,” those who are helpless, dependent, and in need of Christ’s provision.

In Christ alone, you will find “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa. 1:18). Like a child brought

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

to the arms of Jesus, all are welcomed to come and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. For, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ...’everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Rom. 10:9-10,13), like a child. “Let the children come to me,” and be welcomed like a child.

Trusting Like a Child

In the parallel account in the Gospel of Luke, it says that “they were bringing even infants” to Jesus (Luke 18:15). Very young children are brought to Jesus. And what do these children, even infants, bring to Jesus? Can they do anything for him? Babies cry, eat, and poop, and cry some more. What are they good for?

We know that children are dependent upon their parents for everything. And so, the children are brought to Jesus. Bringing nothing to Jesus, he takes them in his arms and prays for them, blessing those who can only receive. The blessing comes from Jesus.

Jesus says, “to such belongs the kingdom of heaven,” or “the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” There is a temptation to interpret this as a reference to innocence, the innocence of a child. But the Fall renders this interpretation impossible: We are sinners not only by thought, word, and deed but by nature. We are born sinners, as were the children in Jesus’ arms. If not innocence, then what does it mean to be like a child in the kingdom of heaven?

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus in the cover of darkness to question him. In their nocturnal dialogue, Jesus explained that you do not belong to the kingdom of God unless you are “born again” (John 3:3), an explanation that Nicodemus could not fathom. He said, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4). Nicodemus understood Jesus quite literally, but Jesus wasn’t describing physical childbirth but spiritual rebirth.

Just as the parents brought their children to Jesus, so we are “born of the Spirit” (John 3:6) and brought to Jesus. Like a child, we come to Jesus with nothing to offer but our desperate need and helplessness. Through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, like a child we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved from our sin and death. For, “whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16), simple child-like faith in Christ Jesus.

As “grown-ups,” let us not overcomplicate the child-like simplicity of faith. God told our father Abraham to look “toward heaven, and number the stars,” if he could. He could not. Then God promised, “So shall your offspring be.” And with child-like faith, Abraham trusted the Lord, and the Lord counted his faith “as righteousness” (Gen. 15:5-6).

This was the defining moment for Abraham, his conversion, as it is for every child of God. And, Abraham matured in his faith, not perfect but dependent upon his heavenly Father. As he walked by faith, he was so to speak living like a child.

Living Like a Child

The children brought to Jesus were dependent upon his arms to hold them and his grace to bless them. Likewise, we who have been welcomed through the gospel and trusted in the name of Christ have received “the Spirit of adoption” as children, crying “Abba! Father!” (Rom. 8:15), a cry that only a true child can cry.

One of the greatest needs a child has is love, especially the love of a parent for a child. Therefore, the Apostle John encourages us like a child in this: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1). As the beloved children of God, we are to live like his children, living dependently upon his provision for his glory.

Why then, as God’s children, are we so prone to worry? He who gathered the children into his arms to bless them says, “do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on” (Matt. 6:25). Are you not the child of God? Does he not know precisely what you need? Rather than worry about what our heavenly Father promises to provide, let us focus our hearts and minds on Christ and his righteous reign over us.

I do not mean to imply that the Christian life may be characterized as childishness. Rather, maturing as a child of God we begin to grow to look more and more like Christ. What he hates we grow to hate. What he loves we grow to love. We mature as a child in Christlikeness.

If this all sounds a bit too simplistic to you, perhaps your life has grown too complicated. Perhaps you have forgotten the simplicity of living like a child of God. Children may I remind you of what Winnie-the-Pooh said, “Sometimes the smallest things take up the most room in your heart.”

I am reminded of sweet memories of bedtime with my children: the sweet smell of a bath, perhaps a bedtime story, most certainly prayers, and a kiss on the cheek. Just as every child loves a good bedtime story, so like a child we grow to love God’s Word. We love to read, to hear it, to meditate upon it, to hide it in our heart. You can never outgrow a love for God’s Word, and if you have you need to return to a child-like dependence upon your heavenly Father.

Just as we cannot say “good night” without our bedtime prayers, like a child we grow to love praying to our heavenly Father. Do the worries of this life keep you from sleeping like a child?

O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Ev’rything to God in prayer.
(“What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” Trinity Hymnal 533)

You can never outgrow praying to your heavenly Father, and if you have you need to return to a child-like dependence upon your heavenly Father.

Like a Child

Like the sweetness of a bedtime kiss, our heavenly Father has blessed us with the presence of his Spirit and the promise of his love. Living like a child, let us remember that there is nothing in all of God's creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39).

Neither life nor death shall ever
from the Lord his children sever;
unto them his grace he showeth,
and their sorrows all he knoweth.

Though he giveth or he taketh,
God his children ne'er forsaketh;
His the loving purpose solely
To preserve them pure and holy.

More secure is no one ever
Than the loved ones of the Savior;
Not your star on high abiding
Nor the bird in home-nest hiding.
("Children of the Heavenly Father," Trinity Hymnal, 131).

By God's grace alone, we are welcomed to Christ alone like a child. By God's grace alone, we are trusting in Christ alone like a child. And, by God's grace alone, we are living in, through, and for Christ alone like a child...to the glory of God alone. Amen.