

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Let the Children Come to Me

Luke 18:15-17

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Scripture

Do you remember Art Linkletter's radio show with the segment, "Kids Say the Darndest Things"? Bill Cosby also hosted a show with the same name. I was reminded of these shows when I read the following story.

Five-year-old Kayse Poland grew more and more excited about her upcoming first day of kindergarten. Kayse's 3-year-old sister, Jayme, watched her with great fascination.

However, on the Sunday before Kayse's first day of kindergarten, she fell and skinned her knee. Tears began to flow, and 3-year-old Jayme, seeing the blood on her big sister's knee, tried to comfort her.

She said, "Don't worry, Kayse, if you die, you'll go to heaven." But that made Kayse cry even more.

"I don't want to go to heaven," she said. "I want to go to kindergarten!"¹

Hopefully, after having gone to kindergarten, Kayse did want to go to heaven too!

Jesus was teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God. The future arrival and consummation of the kingdom of God could be equated in a way with heaven. Jesus wanted people to understand how to enter into heaven. Becoming like a child is a prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of God.

Let's read about Jesus inviting the children to come to him in Luke 18:15-17:

¹⁵ Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to

¹ Hugh Poland, "Kids of the Kingdom," *Today's Christian* (July/August 2005).

such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Luke 18:15-17)

Introduction

Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (in Luke 18:9-14). In that parable Jesus illustrated two approaches to God and entrance into his kingdom. One was the right approach, and the other was the wrong approach.

The wrong approach to God and entrance into his kingdom is to think that we can do so by trusting in our own righteousness (cf. Luke 18:9). The wrong approach is to believe that we can gain access into heaven by our own merits, our own good works, and our own righteousness. The Pharisee illustrated that approach.

The right approach to God and entrance into his kingdom is by humbly trusting in the righteousness of another. The only righteousness that God accepts is that of Jesus Christ. And so the right approach is to believe that we can gain access into heaven *only* by the merits, the good works, and the righteousness of Jesus. The tax collector illustrated that approach.

Luke then further illustrated the kind of humble trust that was required by telling the story of Jesus blessing the children that we are going to examine today.

Lesson

Jesus blessing the children in Luke 18:15-17 shows us a prerequisite for entry into the kingdom of God.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Disciples Rebuke the Parents (18:15)
2. The Savior Receives the Children (18:16-17)

I. The Disciples Rebuke the Parents (18:15)

First, the disciples rebuke the parents.

Luke said in verse 15a that **now they were bringing even infants to Jesus that he might touch them**. The Greek word for **infants** (*brephos*) may also be translated as “(young) child.”² In 2 Timothy 3:15 the same word is used of Timothy, who from childhood had been acquainted with the Scripture.

Parents were bringing their young children to Jesus so **that he might touch them** and bless them. Commentator Darrell Bock notes that “in Judaism, such blessing was given by elders or scribes on the eve of the Day of Atonement.”³ Apparently, these parents wanted Jesus to bless their children. And so he would scoop each precious child into his loving arms and cuddle the child, place his hand on the warm, soft head, lift his eyes up to heaven, and pronounce God’s blessing on each child. Jesus thoroughly enjoyed his interaction with the children and he loved to bless them.

Picture a number of parents gathering around Jesus with their children waiting for Jesus to bless the children. They were chatting with each other, while their young ones were giggling and running in and out of group. But their good cheer was about to be interrupted, because **when the disciples saw** the parents bringing their children to Jesus for his blessing, **they rebuked them** (18:15b).

Why did the disciples **rebuke** the parents? Luke did not tell us the reason for their rebuke. “At best they were protecting Jesus from what they deemed as interruptions or pressure. At worst they saw the situation as a waste of time.”⁴ However, I

² James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 19.

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1469.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 199.

like commentator William Barclay's suggestion:

We are not to think that the disciples were hard and cruel. It was kindness that made them act as they did. Remember where Jesus was going. He was on the way to Jerusalem to die upon a cross. The disciples could see upon his face the inner tension of his heart; and they did not want Jesus to be bothered. Often at home we may say to a little child, "Don't bother your Daddy; he's tired and worried tonight." That is exactly how the disciples felt about Jesus.

It is one of the loveliest things in all the gospel story that Jesus had time for the children even when he was on the way to Jerusalem to die.⁵

The disciples rebuked the parents for bringing their children to Jesus. But, as we shall see, they were wrong to do so.

I get concerned about how we may prevent our children from getting to Jesus for his blessing. Every time I baptize a child, I exhort parents to the careful performance of their duty, requiring, as prescribed in our *Book of Church Order*:

1. That they teach the child to read the Word of God;
2. that they instruct him in the principles of our holy religion, as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, an excellent summary of which we have in the Confession of Faith, and in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly, which are to be recommended to them as adopted by the Church, for their direction and assistance, in the discharge of this important duty;
3. that they pray with and for him;
4. that they set an example of piety and godliness before him; and endeavor, by all the means of God's appointment, to bring up their child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.⁶

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 267–268.

⁶ *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 56, paragraph 5.

Parents, when you stand before Jesus one day, will you be able to say with a clear conscience that you have done everything in your power to bring your children to Jesus?

II. The Savior Receives the Children (18:16-17)

And second, the Savior receives the children.

I want to show you two ways in which Jesus receives the children.

A. *Jesus Allows the Children to Come to Him (18:16)*

First, Jesus allows the children to come to him.

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” (18:16). We see here the heart of Jesus for all people, including young children. Young children, no matter how young you are, never forget that Jesus loves you and has time for you. This story demonstrates his love for children and his desire for children to come to him.

Jesus wanted his disciples and the children’s parents to know that children are candidates for the kingdom of God. Children are able to enter into the kingdom of God, and we should never hinder them from entering the kingdom of God.

I asked my daughter, Lauren, if I could share with you how she came to faith in Jesus Christ at a young age, and also how I discouraged her. Here is what she wrote:

I was sitting in the car at a Wal-Mart parking lot when I first became a Christian. My mom was telling me the story of Jesus and why he had to die. Even though I was only three, this story was already quite familiar to me. And yet this time, something was different. I realized, in a very childlike and simple way, that if this story was true, then I was a part of it. It wasn’t

just a made-up story or something that happened so long ago that it didn't matter – if Jesus came to die, he came to die for *me*. I was a character in this story and someone he was thinking about when he decided to go to the cross! A love like that could not be ignored. I knew I had to respond. I asked my mom if we could pray right then so I could receive Jesus into my heart. She asked me if we could wait until we got home so my dad could be present for the big moment. But it just didn't seem right to me to wait once I realized what I had to do. So I quietly prayed by myself in the backseat and then told my mom what I had done.

When my dad got home that night, I excitedly told him what had happened in the car that afternoon. I had heard about the Holy Spirit whom God sends to live with believers and couldn't wait until he came to be with me. I asked my dad when the Holy Spirit would arrive. My dad, who had become a Christian as a young man, hadn't had much experience with childhood conversions and so wasn't sure if a three-year-old could truly understand the gospel. So he told me that it would probably be a while before the Holy Spirit came to live in my heart. This made sense to me – God must have to send him like a FedEx package, which must take quite a while to be delivered if sent all the way from heaven! It wasn't until a later conversation with my mom that I realized that I already had the Holy Spirit living inside of me and helping me from the moment I prayed that prayer. What a comfort it was to realize that God could deliver his good gifts to me instantly and not have to wait for the mail service!⁷

Now, I actually don't remember my theology being so bad as to tell Lauren that it would take the Holy Spirit a while before he came to live in her heart! The Holy Spirit instantly indwells every believer from the moment of regeneration. However, I do remember saying that I did not think that a child so young could understand the gospel and be saved. Several years later when Eileen realized what I was thinking about young

⁷ Testimony received in an email received from my daughter, Lauren on 7/1/2015.

children not being able to understand the gospel, she helped me to see that I was wrong. When I realized that I could be discouraging and hindering my own young daughter in her relationship to Jesus, I was saddened and repented of my wrong thinking. Ever since then I have encouraged all parents that very young children can believe the gospel and become Christians, as Lauren herself testifies.

But, Jesus also wanted his disciples and their parents to know that children represent and illustrate something very basic about kingdom members. Children by their very nature illustrate *helpless dependence*. A baby, and even a young child, is unable to survive its early years on its own. It is utterly helpless and utterly dependent upon others for its very survival.

And that is what is required in order to gain entrance into the kingdom of God: *helpless dependence*. As one scholar wrote:

But this is the reason they are blessed – just because they [the little children] have nothing to show for themselves. They cannot count on any achievements of their own – their hands are empty like those of a beggar. Jesus enlarges the promise to include everyone. With an authority such as only God can claim, he promises the Kingdom to those whose faith resembles the empty hand of a beggar. Such faith is possible because they have no achievements of their own nor any conceptions of God which can intrude between them and God.⁸

Every child born into this world is completely and totally helpless. Every child born into this world is completely and totally dependent. And that is exactly true of every person who is born again. Every born-again child of God is completely and totally helpless and dependent. Kent Hughes said,

If Billy Graham enters the kingdom, it will not be because he has personally preached to more people than any man in

⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 200.

history. It will not be because he has remained impeccable in his finances when so many have failed. It will not be because he has been a faithful husband. It will not be because, despite his fame, he has remained a humble, self-effacing, kind man. When Billy Graham enters the kingdom, it will be because he came to Christ as a helpless child. It will be because of God's undeserved kindness toward Billy's helplessness.⁹

B. Jesus Compares the Reception of the Kingdom to a Child's Attitude (18:17)

And second, Jesus compares the reception of the kingdom to a child's attitude.

Jesus said in verse 17, **"Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."**

What are the elements of such childlike receiving? Kent Hughes suggests four elements that I will share with you.

1. Unmitigated Trust

The first element of childlike receiving is unmitigated trust.

Children trust others for everything – their food, their lodging, their safety, the arms of others who bear them about. Regarding trust in God, the child's ability to believe has never been wounded by wicked suggestion or burdened with superstition or perverted by falsehoods. These little ones are the opposite of the skeptical theologians whom Jesus battled (cf. Luke 5:21; 20:2). Those who receive the kingdom like a little child have the saving element of faith. They have belief plus trust. They believe in Jesus, but it is more than a mind-belief – they trust Jesus for everything to do with salvation and life.

⁹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 200.

2. Untutored Humility

The second element of childlike receiving is untutored humility.

Children do not engage in the various forms of pride of adulthood. Unlike the Pharisees, little children are not proud of their virtues, “God, I thank you that I am not like all other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (Luke 18:11, 12). A child does not battle self-righteousness in coming to Christ, “Lord, I have been constant in my attendance for years. I have sat at the Lord’s Table for half a century. I give a lot of money to missions.” Self-righteousness is impossible in a child!

Further, a little child is free from the pride of knowledge. He has no learning, no degrees to pile up before the cross. Intellectual conceit is impossible. Children are teachable too. They receive the gospel without proposing amendments to it. They hold no “Jesus seminars”! Because children have not developed the pride of adulthood, they readily repent. Little ones will readily cry over a wrong done. Their unseared consciences have left their powerful moral instruments intact – and they are utterly miserable over their sins. Untutored humility leaves a young soul open to receiving the greatest of gifts.

3. Untarnished Receptivity

The third element of childlike receiving is untarnished receptivity.

Children know how to receive a gift – they simply take it. At their first birthday, they are not sure what a gift is. As two-year-olds, if they have siblings, they understand well enough. And by the time they are three, they are really into receptivity! The wrapping paper flies! As David Gooding explains: “A little child takes its food, its parents’ love and protection, because

they are given, without beginning to think of whether it deserves them or whether it is important enough to merit such attention. So must we all receive God's kingdom and enter into it (see 18:17)."¹⁰

The soul that receives the kingdom is grace-oriented. It is open to the unmerited favor of God.

4. Unabashed Love

And the fourth element of childlike receiving is unabashed love.

Children easily return love for loving gifts. Enthusiastic hugs and kisses and multiple "Thanks" are showered on the giver. And spiritually, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Unabashed love is the province of those who receive the kingdom as little children.¹¹

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Jesus blessing the children in Luke 18:15-17, we should demonstrate childlike faith.

Charles Spurgeon once said, "We must not think a child cannot come to God until he is like a man, but a man cannot come until he is like a child. We must grow down until we become like a child."¹²

Friends, entrance into the kingdom of God requires childlike faith. We are not able to present any merits of our own. But, in helpless dependence upon God, we may receive the gift of eternal life, and become children of God. Amen.

¹⁰ David Gooding, *According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 295.

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 200-202.

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 24 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1972), 581.

Mission Statement

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, Jesus blessed the children because he loved them and because the kingdom of God belonged to such as those.

Help us to come to you with childlike faith. Help us to recognize that we are enabled to enter the kingdom of God only in helpless dependence upon you. If there is anyone here today who has never put his or trust in you, enable that person to repent of his or her sin, and believe in Jesus alone for the gift of eternal life.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!