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Following Jesus Means... Becoming Like a Child

October 3, 2021

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TEXT: Mark 10:13-16 (ESV)

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

Dear friends,

In our day, it isn't very popular to be called a follower. Corporations, for instance, look for leadership qualities in a person, and young people aspire to be leaders in some of their activities. And even obituaries usually call attention to the leadership a person has provided in his or her lifetime. We put leaders on pedestals – but what about followers? Don't we need them? Author S.I. McMillan, in his book *None of These Diseases*, tells the story of a young woman who wanted to go to college. But her heart sank when she read the question on the application that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote "No" and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, though, she received this acceptance letter from the college. It was rather humorous. "Dear applicant," it stated, "A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 leaders. We're pleased to accept you because we feel it is imperative that they at least have one follower."

Here's a question for you: did Jesus ever call for leaders? You will look in vain through the gospels to find him asking for anyone but followers. That's why we've been looking at Mark's gospel, to learn more about what it means to follow Jesus. Like those first disciples, we have so much to learn from him on this subject: following him. In today's text, we find his disciples rebuking those parents who brought children to Jesus to be touched. And Jesus turned on the disciples and sets them straight.

Interesting, isn't it? A few days earlier, Jesus had taught them that receiving a child in his name is receiving him. How quickly they forgot that truth. But here we have them treating children as an annoying interruption, not worth Jesus' time and attention. They were incensed at the nerve of those people who brought those noisy kids. You see, children had no status in that society. They were easily ignored and sometimes even treated as property to be sold. They added nothing to the family's economy or honor, was the thought, and did not really count. In fact, in the Greco-Roman world, one could literally throw children away and expose unwanted infants at birth to the elements. And in rabbinic Judaism, one rabbi voiced sentiments shared by many: that a sage should not bother with children; morning sleep and midday wine and children and sitting in the meeting house of ignorant put a man of the world. But Jesus goes against this grain and he receives the powerless, those regarded as insignificant. And he insists that his community embrace the little ones rather than dismissing them. He says, "Hey, let them come to me. Don't hinder them." Everyone matters to Jesus, even kids. There's no one too small or too low on society's status scale for him to receive and bless. They're important to him. "Let them come. Don't hinder them. Don't get in their way," he says. "Because in my kingdom, everyone is important and valuable to me. I want you to have the same attitude as my disciples," he's saying to those guys.

It's a good message for the church. Kids belong in church, they belong in worship. Oh, I know they can be noisy and disturbing. And parents complain even about, "I can't get a thing out of it because the kids are here." But that's your job, to disciple them, to come into the presence of God and worship. Kids matter – in the church, especially, we should recognize that. A few years ago we did a building campaign in our church, and the theme for it was "Let the children come," because the space we wanted to build was to be for kids to come and learn and play in and get to know Jesus. It was a big project. And I was so proud of our congregation and how they responded to that call. And boy, have we been blessed with kids ever since. Jesus says they belong; "to such belong the kingdom of God," in fact, he says.

Jesus has been announcing this kingdom of God. Remember at the very beginning as he began his ministry, he said, "The kingdom of God is drawn near." And then he'd point to himself and he said, "Therefore, repent and believe the good news." That was his main message. This kingdom talk was not about a political takeover for Israel, and his talking about a kingdom is not talking about a location either, but about restored relationship with God, forgiven, forever his, a restored world; people receiving lots of promises from him, such as his constant presence and the presence of his Holy Spirit, working in a shaping us into the image of Christ himself. With love and patience and kindness and gentleness and self-control, just to name a few of his characteristics that he wants us to have, that he wants to give us. And he says this kingdom welcomes those who come in weakness and those who have no status.

And then he goes on to something else, and that's where I want to focus today, is on his last statement. Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." Jesus seems to be holding children up as the model that we adults can follow. Now, he's not talking about being childish, being immature and unreasonable and selfish, obstinate, stubborn, like we sometimes refer to someone – "Don't be so childish," when they're like that. He says become like a child, become like a child. That's how we receive him: empty handed, totally dependent on his grace, receiving his gifts with simple faith. Gerhard Frost tells a story about childlike trust that I have always liked. He writes,

A friend was planning a vacation for a family of six, a rather ambitious holiday to various points in Europe. As departure time came near, he spent many hours with maps and itineraries and other travel information spread out on a large table in front of him. And a few days before they were due to begin their journey, the youngest of his children came into the room where her father was working. She peered over his shoulder at the maps and papers, and she watched for a while as he went from one stack of papers to another, taking notes and adding to the growing list he was making. Finally, she climbed up in his lap and said contentedly to him, "Oh, I'm so glad all I have to do is just go along."

That's the mark of a trusting child. The willingness to feel secure in another's hands – trusting. And this is the mark of the children of God: a willingness to welcome the unknown future and commit ourselves to the father's hands. My little grandson, Henry, who is in kindergarten this year, told his dad the night before his first day of school that he likes to talk to Jesus in prayer at bedtime. And later on he said he knows that Jesus is

going to go with him to school, and that he can always talk to him there to. Simple, childlike faith at work made this Grandpa's heart so glad.

What does it look like, then, for an adult to be like a child? Well, that's coming to Jesus empty-handed to receive his gift of eternal life. Receiving it not on my own merit, like something I've earned, but simply trusting in Christ alone and what he's done for me at the cross. It's also trusting in his promises that he'll never leave me no matter where I go. It's resting upon his words, being assured over and over again that he really does know me and cares about me, and nothing can separate me from his love. It's also trusting, taking seriously his word, the Bible – reading it and believing it and doing it. Considering his word the absolute truth for living a good life, believing that my heavenly father is the smartest person in the whole wide world, and he knows what he's talking about when it comes to life. After all, he invented it. Childlike trust. And it's talking to him each day, surrendering everything to his care, no matter how small or big it is, knowing that he is listening and he will answer, and he is so big.

Some of us find it hard to do that. We want to stay in control and find our security elsewhere, maybe in ourselves or in earthly things. We're far more comfortable having God as our coequal, our partner, instead of our leader, instead of our father, trusting him totally. If you're struggling with believing and trusting about what I've been talking about today, I would invite you to look at the rest of this story. I love the last scene: children in the arms of Jesus. He took them in his arms, can't you just picture it? He received them open arms and blessed them, holding them to himself, and then laid his hands upon them, lovingly, blessing them. It's an endearing picture. In the Jesus storybook bible for children, (which I highly recommend for you grandparents to get for your grandchildren) the writer, Sally Lloyd-Jones, asks the child reading the story or hearing this story, this question:

Now, if you had been there, what do you think? Would you have had to line up quietly to see Jesus? Do you think Jesus would have asked you to how good you'd been before he'd give you a hug? Would you have had to be on your best behavior and get dressed up and not speak until you're spoken to? Or would you have done just what those children did: run straight up to Jesus and let him pick you up in his arms and swing you and kiss you and hug you and then sit you on his lap and listen to your stories and your chats?

And she goes on to say, "You see, children love Jesus. And they knew they didn't need to do anything special for Jesus to love them. All they needed to do was run into his arms. And he received them and blessed them."

I would also like you to consider the opening statement in Mark 10, which tells us where Jesus is headed. He's headed towards Jerusalem, where he will be rejected and suffer and die and rise again. And those same arms and hands that received the children that day and blessed them would be spread out on a cross in order to bless you and me. That's how much he loves you. On that cruel cross he suffered and died for your sins and mine as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. He came to redeem us and make us God's kids, and give us a whole new life with him for eternity. We know that he rose again in victory over sin and death, which was simply God's endorsement of Jesus and everything he said. And Jesus is present with us now, even today, with those same outstretched arms that received those children, and those same nail-pierced hands, welcoming us to himself to bless us with the blessings that only he can give. And to all who come to him, believing in this crucified and risen Christ, he gives the right to become children of God, with a promising eternal future.

Why don't you come, if you have not already? Won't you come like a child, empty-handed, trusting in him. And then living like a child under his care and his leadership, believing that he knows best, that he knows what we need. Won't you come and join the chorus of those who are singing from personal experience that "Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so," and "Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me." Aren't you come like a child? For he does love you, and he will welcome you, today and every day. Our closing prayer today are words of the famous hymn writer Charles Wesley from his hymn, *Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild*. Would you pray with me?

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child.
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to thee.

Amen.