

Together We...Invest in the Next Generation
Children Should Thrive in a Healthy Church

Mark 10:13-16

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on November 5th, 2023

(Read Text)

Saturday and Sunday Mornings

If you were like most children growing up in the latter half of the 20th century, Saturday mornings were spent watching cartoons. Beginning in 1966, the three major networks all showed blocks of cartoons on Saturday mornings. Shows like Magilla Gorilla, The Bugs Bunny and Road Runner Show, Adam Ant, Space Ghost, Scooby Doo, Super Friends, Hong Kong Phooey and Captain Caveman would roll across the children of America in the 60's and 70's.

And then they realized that children were beginning to struggle to tell the difference between the shows and the commercials that ran alongside them. So the Federal Trade Commission banned advertising geared to six year olds or younger. It then meant a plethora of "public service educational programming" began to take hold like School House Rock and then One to Grow On and The More You Know. Eventually all the cartoons were based on toys with the intention to sell more merchandise.

By the time technology came along in the 90's, the Saturday mornings cartoon was no longer every kid's weekend priority. As each progressive generation came along, Saturday morning cartoon viewing declined. The same trend holds true for Sunday morning church attendance.

Church attendance is declining by generation. A recent Gallup poll reveals that the decline is steeper among adults who did not go to church as a child. Among adults 55 and older who attended church regularly as a child, two-thirds still attend regularly (68%).

Of those who are 35 and older and did not attend church regularly as a child, only one-third presently attend a Christian church. Of those under the age of 35 who did not attend church regularly as a child, only 16% attend today.

Just like American adults grew out of watching Saturday morning cartoons, most also left behind Sunday morning church.

Despite their childhood familial practices, most Americans now say they seldom or never attend religious services at 60%. For U.S. adults under 35, 58% say they went to church every week or almost every week growing up. Among those 35 or older, 70% report regular church attendance during their childhood.

The less one attended as a child, the more likely one is to seldom or never attend today. Among those who attended close to weekly growing up, 50% are rarely if ever at a religious service. Of those who grew up going to church monthly, 66% seldom or never attend. And 4 in 5 (80%) of those who seldom or never attended as a child continue to avoid church today.

That is why we are focused on reaching the next generations while they are children. Because the numbers don't lie. If you don't reach a family when their children are young, 80% of them remain unreached. This is why we are committed to becoming a church that reaches and invests in the next generations. Together we will invest in the next generation because children should thrive in a healthy church.

Jesus and Children

The disciples act like truculent bouncers. They rebuke these parents and try to block their children's access to Jesus. Again, they want to throw their weight around and exercise control by keeping at bay others who come from outside their circle. These aspiring leaders want to be the gatekeepers, who determine not only who can use Jesus's name (Mark 9:38), but also who can have admission to his presence.

Jesus must indignantly intercede on behalf of the children and inform the disciples that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. The true disciple must become as a child to receive the kingdom rather than act like an overseer, who drives others away.

Introduction

Children occupied a precarious position in Jesus's world. Sometimes children were loved and sometimes children were exploited, depending upon how they were perceived as benefiting the family.

Children clearly were not presumed to be blessings in the non-Christian culture of Christ's day. However, in the biblical, Hebrew culture, children were considered to be gifts from the Lord.

Rachel spoke as the mother of her people when she cried, "give me children, or I shall die!" (Genesis 30: 1). Hannah prayed in the temple for a child. When God answered, she named him Samuel ("God has heard"). She later gave Samuel to the Lord's service (1 Samuel 1: 20-28). Hebrew culture elevated the family and children!

But even in Jewish culture, children had no status. They were easily ignored and barred access because nobody would take the trouble to complain and fight for them. These children, who must be brought to Jesus by others, have nothing to commend an audience with Jesus. And these children cannot defend themselves against bullies. But Jesus holds them up as an example to his disciples.

Their littleness contrasts sharply with that of the overbearing disciples, who want to assert their power and influence. The disciples had to learn to both minister to little children and to adopt their attitude of littleness.

Mark ten shows a further elevation of children by our Lord. The text elevates children as people, and it elevates their faith, and as a result it also elevates our faith.

Jesus and Children

The account opens in verse 13 with Mark telling us that "they were bringing children to Jesus so that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them." As best we can gather, fathers and mothers, and perhaps older children, were bringing young children, many of whom were babies (that is how Luke describes them in his parallel account, 18: 15), to Jesus for his blessing. This was in keeping with the classic Jewish custom that dated all the way back to the time when the patriarch Israel (Jacob) laid his hands upon the heads of Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh and blessed them (Genesis 48:14). It was all very proper, traditional, and wonderful. Proud parents held out their precious children to Jesus, who took them in his arms, where they snuggled close. He placed his hand on their warm little heads and, lifting his eyes to heaven, pronounced a blessing.

We can surmise that quite a number of cheerful families stood in line chatting, with babes in arms and children scurrying around.

Then it stopped, and outside the house the disciples were sending them away with a rebuke!

Why were they doing this? Giving them the benefit of the doubt, they could have been trying to protect Jesus. The disciples knew Jesus faced immense pressure. Wherever he went, he found conflict: one time demons, another time the religious establishment, etc. And if that was not enough there were always crushing and crashing crowds. The disciples even pressured Jesus themselves. This matter of blessing children was simply one more drain.

Besides, these were just *children*. They were of little importance. They could not understand what Jesus taught and even if they did understand Jesus, they could not contribute any money to the cause. So the disciples stopped the flow. Those parents who stubbornly remained in line received rebuke, perhaps along the lines of “the master is a busy man. Now, Shalom, be on your way, and take your stroller!”

Verse 14 indicates that Jesus saw what was happening, and “he was indignant.” The Greek word translated “indignant” occurs only here in the New Testament and is a combination of two words: “much” and “to grieve.” He was *much grieved*! The things that grieve us or make us indignant reveal much about the kind of people we are, and what Jesus said and did here tells us volumes about him, as well as about our children and ourselves.

Our Lord’s Elevation of Children (v.14)

Jesus was angry, and his words have a clipped, staccato ring to them: (he said to them, let the children come to me; Do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God” (V. 14). What could we draw from these passionate words?

First, Jesus loves children. Jesus was a real baby, who grew into a real child, and then a real teenager, and then a real man. In the 2nd century St. Irenaeus said of Christ, “he came to save all by means of himself... who through him are born again unto God, infants and children, and boys and youth.... he therefore passed through every age becoming an infant for infants... a child for children... a youth for youths...”

We see Christ’s love for children as he celebrates the delight of a mother on giving birth in John 16:21;

we see Christ's love for children in the gentle love of a father who cuddles his children in Luke 11:7; and we see Christ's love for children as he describes a parental love that listens to a child's every request in Matthew 7:9 and Luke 11:11.

Many of his miracles involved children: the nobleman's little son (John 4:46, 54), the demonized son of the man on the mount of transfiguration (Mark 9:14, 29), Jairus's daughter to whom Christ tenderly said, "Talitha cumi," which means "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (5:41). Jesus truly, as man and God, loved children!

Since Jesus loved children, and since his Spirit dwells in us, we are very near the heart of Christ when we love children.

So we learn from Jesus's indignation, first, that Jesus loves children, and, secondly, that Jesus affirms and respects the personhood and spirituality of children. In saying, "for to such belongs the Kingdom of God," he affirms their full spirituality. They are the hearts he takes to himself! We shall see why in verse 15, but we note here that Christ affirms and proclaims the spiritual capacity of children. If there ever was a text relevant to child evangelism, this is it. Children can authentically come to Christ early on!

We experienced a powerful reminder of that truth today as our service began as a child prayed for his mother's baptism.

The insights of Harvard-trained theologian James Fowler and others can be used to help us bring children to true faith. But we must not be reductionist in our view of faith. It is a mystery, and Paul says it is "the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8) and therefore not rigidly bound to a clinician's developmental ladder. Jesus is optimistic about the spirituality of children, and we should be the same.

Charles Spurgeon, a noted soul winner, said: "I will say broadly that I have more confidence in the spiritual life of the children that I have received into this church than I have the spiritual condition of the adults that's received. I will go even further than that and say that I have usually found a clear knowledge of the gospel in a warmer love to Christ in the child converts than in the man converts. I leave an astonish you still more by saying that I have sometimes met with a deeper spiritual experience in children of 10 and 12 than I have in certain persons of 50 and 60."

Doctor Jim slack, head of demographics for the Southern Baptist foreign missionary society, shared the results of the Gallup survey: 19 out of 20 people who became Christians did so before the age of 25. At age 25, one in 10,000 will become believers; At 35, one in 50,000; At 45, one in 200,000; At 55, one in 300,000; At 75, one in 700,000.

What a call for parents, young people, Bible school teachers, and club workers to keep at it! While we parents must never resort to extracting bogus conversions from our children, together we must cultivate their spiritual awareness and sensitivity, and above all, pray fervently and in detail for them.

D. L. Moody once returned from a meeting and reported 2 1/2 conversions. "two adults and a child I suppose?" asked his host. "No," said Moody, "two children and an adult. The children gave their whole lives. The adult only had half of his left to give."

How sobering are Jesus's words, "do not hinder them." This also flies in the face of so many generations who were taught that children had little to no status and were not to have access to a noted teacher like the Lord Jesus. For centuries Jewish teachers had never been bothered to have children in their presence. The disciples are honoring the practices and habits of their ancestors as they rebuke the parents and stop the procession of children into the presence of Jesus. And he sharply rebukes them. It is as if Jesus is saying, "I am not interested in continuing the traditions of your ancestors. I am more concerned with saving your descendants."

Verse 14 elevates the spiritual capacity of children for all the Church to see. Next, in verse 15, the Lord elevates the children's faith.

Our Lord's Elevation of Children's Faith (v.15)

Hear our Lord's words: "truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." The word translated "not" is very strong. New Testament scholar William Lane comments: "The solemn pronouncement is directed to the disciples but has a pertinence for all men confronted by the gospel because it speaks of the condition for entrance into the Kingdom of God." *No one will get into the Kingdom of God unless he or she receives God's salvation like a child - no one!* How are we to understand and apply this?

For starters, coming as a “child” does not infer innocence. Any 2-year-old dispels such a notion! Neither does “like a child” suggest the wondrous subjective states we often find in children such as trustfulness, receptivity, simplicity, or wonder, beautiful as these are.

What Jesus teaches here is an objective state that every child who has ever lived, regardless of race, culture, or background, has experienced - *helpless dependence*.

Every single child in the world is absolutely, completely, totally, objectively, existentially helpless! And so it must be for every child born into the Kingdom of God. Children of the Kingdom enter it helpless, ones for whom everything must be done.

We are to experience the littleness and helplessness of children if we are to come to know Jesus. I cannot think of a better reminder of how we are to be little and helpless than to have so many little and helpless ones in our church and services. Some may look and see chaos as crying babies interrupt the truly remarkably insightful words of the preacher. I see a constant reminder that helps me measure exactly how I am doing in how I relate to my Heavenly Father. When we come together to invest in the next generation, it isn't out of some sort of spiritual Florence Nightengale syndrome: “What can I do to help them?” We are also to consider how their example of helplessness is reflected in our own experience.

There is no other fundamental meaning for verse 15. Have you come to Christ like this? Is it his grace plus your nothingness?

Realization that one is as helpless as a child naturally fosters humility. Jesus gave reference to this connection when, in a similar but separate statement, he said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4).

Now watch what happens to the waiting children: “and he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them” (V. 16). Bengel says, “He did more than they asked,” and he is probably right, for the word translated “blessed” means “fervently blessed.” Christ did this joyfully, with a fervent heart, for they refreshed his spirit.

When parents bring their children to the presence of Jesus, lives change. Not just children, but families. Generations. If together we can reach and invest in children, there is a better chance the church can keep them as they grow up. That is why churches must become re-routed, re-wired, transformed so they can become places in which young people thrive. Places where children thrive. Places where preschoolers and babies thrive.

For a church to become such a place, it requires an entire investment to commit and covenant to reach emerging generations for the sake of the Kingdom and in the name of Lord. Are you more concerned with maintaining some method that your ancestors enjoyed or with becoming the place where your descendants can thrive?

This past week, I was so excited to see so many of our church family come together to take the message of the Kingdom and the Church out into Berkeley County at Light the Night. Thousands were impacted by that investment and that commitment to pop corn and play games and give candy and invest in conversations. Thousands of people munched on popcorn and hundreds of gospel presentations and church invitations were shared.

In one conversation my wife had with a few young ladies at our home, these young ladies connected the Light the Night outreach with our Glow in the Dark Easter Egg hunt in the spring. Our neighbors are beginning to see a church love them and reach out to them. Let's commit to continue to do this together.

And what about you here this morning who may not have ever come to Christ in child-like faith?

Do you desire to be held in Christ's arms, to you pronounce a blessing over you? Eternity will reveal that is all we ever wanted, and our Spirit-given response is, "Dearest Father" - "ABBA! Father!" (cf. Romans 8: 15; Galatians 4:6).

Jesus had elevated children! He believes they can know him as truly as anyone else, that they can have a vibrant relationship with him.

Jesus had also elevated the faith of children. No one will receive the kingdom of God without this helpless dependence and humility.

Jesus said, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”

Today you too can come to Jesus by modeling in faith the littleness and the helplessness of a child. There is nothing you can do other than trust Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, for life.