

Luke 18:15-17 - Like a Child

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We are going to Luke 18 today.

We'll read our text today and then unpack it layer by layer:

Luke 18:15-17 “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 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.”

So this passage begins with people bringing “infants” to Jesus - this was a word used to describe nursing babies. The smallest of the small.

And people were bringing their babies to Jesus for him to touch them (verse 15). You see throughout the Old Testament the rite of laying hands on someone and pronouncing a blessing on them: Noah blessed Shem and Japheth, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, Jacob blessed his sons and grandsons.

They conveyed a blessing by laying on of hands. So people are bringing babies to be blessed by Jesus.

The disciples rebuke them. And the word for rebuke there is (in verse 15) the same word that's used to describe Jesus's rebuke of demons when he casts them out.

So this is not a kind dismissal, “Jesus is really busy but thanks for coming.” This is a “get those snot-nosed kids out of here, this is Jesus for crying out

loud. He's got bigger fish to fry, we've got a kingdom to build, He's not gonna be on the nursery worker rotation."

So there's the contrast in this passage. Helpless babies and the very important people, the disciples of Jesus. The important tell the unimportant to get out.

Now the disciples, in their day, would have been thought of as totally right. Their dismissal of these babies would have been seen as the right thing to do given the stature of Jesus and the fact that, in their day, kids just weren't valued.

We believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way, show them all the beauty they possess inside.

But there aren't songs like that in the ancient world. You don't find a whole lot of sympathy toward kids in ancient literature. Childhood wasn't celebrated like it is in our day, and the characteristics of kids that we find adorable: the innocence, the curiosity, the humility, those things were not looked favorably upon, because they're not super useful.

Among the gentiles, little children were generally thought of as a nuisance. They had a low view of little kids. In the Roman Empire, abortion was common. Infanticide - killing babies once they're born, was also common. Little kids were counted as a burden: they were loud, they were messy, they were not productive. And among the gentiles the task of caring for kids was considered to be the most menial of jobs and you would hire it out if you could afford to. It was beneath a sophisticated Roman to care for their own kids.

Among the Jews it was a little better, they valued the lives of their children as God's people have always been against abortion, knowing that even the unborn child is made in the image of God. The scriptures taught God's people to count children as a blessing. But while the kids were little, they were to be seen and not heard. Their job was to just grow until they could work in the fields and help the family out some day. And it wasn't

considered the work of important people to deal with kids.

To all of them, children would be small and insignificant. They weren't worthy of a slot on Jesus's google calendar. People who meet the king are people who've achieved something or have something to offer.

So the disciples do what would have looked to everybody like the right thing to do. They said, "Get those kids out of here."

Luke 18:16 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.

Mark's gospel says Jesus was indignant here - this made Jesus mad.¹ The way this is worded in Luke in the greek is a little unusual. It could be translated, "But Jesus himself called to them..." Almost like Jesus is saying, "The disciples are screwing this up, I'm gonna do this myself."

I spent my teenage years and early 20s working at a Christian camp all summer. It was just a guys' camp at the time. And we worked our way up the ranks from junior leaders through senior leaders. And at the end of the week after the kids all went home, we had to clean up camp. And that cleanup would happen on Friday nights, and it was usually a light-hearted time - the responsibility of caring for the kids that week was all gone, now we just had to clean.

And one of the big jobs was to clean the shower house - and we would do that with hoses and soap and mops. And when we were younger, it usually devolved into us being totally soaked, sliding around in the suds, spraying each other.

But as we got older, we just kind of wanted to get the job done and go to sleep. So a friend and I, week after week, would get to the shower house and send all of the younger leaders away - "You guys just go..." and we would just get the job done right and quick. Sometimes when you want to get the job done right, you do it yourself.

¹ Mark 10:14

Jesus is all for training up the disciples, and He delegates an awful lot. But he sees them here screwing up so badly that he himself has to jump in and do the thing right. This job was being messed up, and Jesus Himself got involved to get it done the right way.

There's something important at stake in not messing up this interaction with the babies.

So why did he jump in and overturn their verdict that the kids couldn't come to Him?

For a few reasons - we'll start on the surface and move deeper.

What's evident on the surface is that

I. Children are Valued in the Kingdom of God

Even before they can talk, walk, feed themselves, care for themselves- before they have anything to give back, Jesus values them and welcomes them.

So this flies in the face of any thought that children are a nuisance or a burden. Jesus loves them.

So we have to check to make sure that, as followers of Jesus as our king, we have the same view.

If Jesus welcomes children, we should too. Children are a blessing from God, and this is true in our families and true in our church.

Psalm 127: 3-5 . 3 Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. 4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. 5 Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Children are a blessing. So we should love and welcome children. We should respect and honor parenthood. Children are a gift from God, and raising them is a privilege.

Now this doesn't mean raising kids is easy. You might hear that raising kids is a blessing and then you have a child and a few months in you're saying, "I have not slept in 3 months, we spent more on diapers than on my whole wardrobe, I'm tired, and broke, and I get puked on every day, someone spilled milk under the couch cushion and we didn't know for a few days and now we really know" Total bait and switch on the kids are a blessing thing.

But this is not a promise of ease. We live in world that doesn't have a category for doing something hard and life-changing and that requires self-sacrifice, but is also a good thing. If we say, "I've changed everything in my life for this kid," it wouldn't sound like a good thing. But that's because we tend to think easy things are good things, and hard things are bad. Self-sacrifice is bad, giving ourselves for another is bad - we live in the age of the self, and if kids get in the way of the self-improvement project we're undertaking than they're not very useful. So parenting, because it's hard, must be bad. It must be a burden that nobody would want to bear.

But we need to remember what we believe! We believe the Gospel. Which means that we believe that the greatest deed ever done was Jesus Christ giving himself completely on the cross. Pouring himself out, emptying himself, submitting to the will of the Father. The hardest thing ever done, and the best.

So when we say kids are a blessing and we say they're not a burden, we are by no means saying that having or raising kids is a piece of cake. It's very hard. And very good. We lose some of ourselves for the gain of another. And that's good!

So we know from Jesus that kids are a blessing. We also know from this story that Jesus wants kids to be brought to Him.

As we work to raise our kids, the priority has to be bringing them to Jesus. We want them to succeed academically, artistically, athletically, socially. More than anything, our desire should be that our kids are brought to Jesus and our kids have a persevering walk with Jesus.

People will say today that we should raise our kids to make their own choices about spiritual things. We don't want to make little kids go to church if they don't want to, or teach them about Christ at home, because we don't want to force it on them.

And depending on what you mean by force it, I might agree, because ultimately you can't make anyone believe.

But I have never met a parent who lets their kids make all of their own choices about what food they eat. Or whether they do their homework. Or whether they chew on the Christmas tree lights.

We feed them what's best for them, we teach them not to do the things that aren't best for them. And yes, once they're adults, they will make their own choices about the asparagus and gnawing on electric cables, but when they are kids we give them patterns. We feed them the right way so they grow. We teach them what's right, saturate them with good wisdom and practices, all in the hope that they take root.

And in the same way with little kids, Christian parents raise them as Christians. They raise them to know Christ - to read the bible, to pray, to gather with the church and worship. We teach them that Jesus is the only way, because He is.

And there does come a day when those arrows in our quiver are put into the

bow and fired - we do have to let go, but we spend their childhood aiming them.

And if we believe that Jesus is the king of all kings, and that everyone and everything else is subordinate to him - if we really believe that, we want to raise our kids to believe that.

While it's true that none of us can make our kids on a heart level repent of sin and trust in Jesus, we need to do everything we can do to bring them to Jesus.

Now this is different from doing everything we can to force our kids to pray the sinners prayer.

Often, parents, out of love for their kids, will try to lead their kids to Christ like this: Do you want to go to heaven when you die with mommy and daddy, or do you want to go to hell and burn forever? Heaven? OK, repeat after me. And then we can sleep well at night, thinking our kids just accepted Jesus.

That can do more harm than good - it can create lots of false assurance of salvation, or confusion, or trusting in a prayer instead of trusting in Jesus. The kids pray that prayer 5000 times growing up, assuming they didn't really mean it.

We can get so focused on the decision - because we like things neat and clean and want to know for sure where our kids stand. And we can be so focused on leading them to a moment that we don't do all the other things we can do to help them know Christ.

So what does it take for a child, or for anyone, to become a Christian?

They need faith in Jesus Christ dying for their sins and rising again, and they

need to repent of sin - or recognize that they are personally sinners and in need of that Savior, and to turn from sin.

We teach them the commandments, the law, so it can do its work to expose the sin in their hearts. And we teach them all about Jesus. Tell them the Bible stories, read the scriptures with them, pray with them, talk with them about Jesus and give them the worldview with Jesus as the capstone. We start the week with gathered worship with them, making Jesus and his people the first part of our week. We build friend communities for them where the other kids know the Lord and have parents that do. We saturate their lives with Gospel.

If you've ever made sugar crystals, you know they're made by stirring in way more sugar than you think that little jar of water can hold, and then dangling a string in there and letting the crystals form.

And I think the best way for us to cause faith and repentance to crystalize on the hearts of our children is by continually stirring in the Gospel - stir in tons of bible, do it with joy, pray for them - saturate their lives with it.

We love good conversion stories as Christians. We love to hear about how bad people were and then in a moment God broke in and completely changed them.

But with kids that we are raising in a Christian household, we shouldn't feel like their conversion isn't real if its not so dramatic. Now our kids need conversion - they need to be taken from death to life, they need to really believe that they're sinners and turn from their sin and trust Jesus. But it's also a great story if their environment is so saturated in the truth of the Gospel that they come to believe and repent very young, and maybe someday don't even remember that moment.

Tim Keller compared converting to Christ like planting a seed in the ground.

Sometimes, if the ground is hard and dry, a farmer can go out with a pick-axe and smash the ground, put a hole in it, and then slip in that seed - in a dramatic moment. Or, if the ground is soft and wet, without any big drama, you can just push a seed in with your finger, without it hardly being noticed.

In both cases, the seed is in the ground.

So don't feel like it's bad if your kids come to faith very young, never have a dramatic conversion, and maybe they look back and they're not sure when the real moment that faith began was.

Now I do think that, theologically, for everyone, there is that moment. You're either dead or alive spiritually, you're either God's enemy or his child, you're either in darkness or in light - there is no in between. But that doesn't mean we're always sure when that moment was. We don't have to know exactly when we were born again to know that we were.

I don't remember being born. But I'm pretty sure I was. And if you ask me to prove to you that I'm alive, I would point out things like my heartbeat and my breathing lungs. I probably wouldn't dig for a birth certificate to prove that I'm alive. And if our children have repented of their sins and have faith in Christ, I don't think we all need to know the exact moment for that moment to have happened. I'd rather look for present evidence of life: is there faith now, is there a repentant life now, is there love for the Lord now.

So we welcome kids to Christ at home. And:

In the Church

We also want to be a church that welcomes and loves kids.

For one, we want you to know that kids are always welcome in service.

Crying babies probably bother you more than they bother me - I've had four, I don't hear it much anymore. If they get really loud, feel free to take them in the back, but don't be embarrassed by it - we're glad we're a church that has been blessed with lots of kids.

We've also got Gospel centered classes for kids up to age 12, another place where kids are welcomed and taught and brought to Jesus. And our kids have all benefited so much from our teachers and volunteers and workers who spend so many hours teaching these kids the Bible.

And when you help in those classes, remember who you're being like.

Here is Jesus, the king of all kings, is working with little children.

So the first layer here is that Kids are valued in the kingdom of God, so we value kids. We welcome the people Jesus welcomes. And we bring our kids to Jesus.

But there's more - look at 16 again:

Luke 18:16 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.

Notice that Jesus is not only teaching a lesson about children here.

He is teaching a lesson about people like children - people such as children.

II. The kingdom of God belongs to people like these children.

So in their world children were insignificant and unimportant. The important people sent them away. But in the kingdom that Jesus is bringing, the insignificant and unimportant own the kingdom.

So this kingdom is an upside down kingdom. The last are the first, the least are the greatest.

This is a kingdom that doesn't work how kingdoms work.

You achieve to run a kingdom. You're the most powerful militarily. You have the most people behind you. Even in our country, we know that those with the most money have the most influence. Kingdoms belong to the winners.

Nursing babies aren't winning. You don't own a kingdom because you won the dirty diaper contest at the day care. That's not power.

But again and again, Jesus is teaching that it isn't the ones who achieve who own the kingdom.

The Pharisee in the last passage could boast about his religious achievements, he didn't get the kingdom. But a tax collector, the one who is worse than even the rest of the sinners, does.

The good son could boast about his loyalty to the father and how worthy he is to have the inheritance. The bad son, who is worse than most people, who squandered an inheritance on prostitutes, he is welcomed in to a kingdom celebration when he repents.

The rich man who observes the temple ceremonies dies and goes to hell, while the poor beggar Lazarus who wasn't even let in goes to heaven.

Now there are babies, weaker and more helpless than even the rest of the children, and the kingdom is theirs.

Again and again, those who lose are said to enter the kingdom, rule the kingdom, own the kingdom and the least worthy of it.

This kingdom that Jesus brings is a totally upside down kingdom. You don't get to the top of it the same way you get to the top of any other kingdom, any other organization, any other social structure.

Every earthly kingdom is gained by some kind of power. This kingdom of God is gained by weakness and humility.

Every earthly kingdom is gained by merit - those who achieve are in and the underachievers are out. But if this one is gained by children, babies even, then it must be a kingdom that is gained by grace.

Babies gain the kingdom not because of what they have but because of what they lack.

They lack sophistication.

They lack knowledge.

They lack ability and strength.

They lack independence.

They really can't do anything.

We love them but they are 100% need and 0% contribution. Nobody who brings a new baby home says "The thing I love about my baby is how much they help with the household chores. How much they share the load when it comes to paying the bills. Everything's easier now that we have a baby at home."

Babies bring a lot of need for a lot of years.

Our kids are all junior and senior high now, but I still remember a couple of years ago, Debbie and I went on a walk - and that was the first time we were away from the kids without getting a babysitter or someone to watch them. And there was a feeling of "Whoa, our lives just changed." It had just been a dozen years of them needing us all the time, and now not as much. And there's a relief that comes with that. It's easier when those around us are more contributors and less needy.

But Jesus says, "But it's people like the needy babies that get the kingdom of God."

Kingdom is offered to the helpless, needy, powerless, weak.

This is great news.

In this passage, Jesus opens up the kingdom of God to people who could never possess a kingdom.

People who have no achievements that can get them a kingdom, and only need, are now welcomed into the kingdom.

This isn't a kingdom just for the achievers. This is a kingdom given freely by grace to the undeserving, the sinful, those who can't earn it.

Jesus brought good news to tax collectors who knew they weren't righteous, to prostitutes who sensed their brokenness, to addicts who knew their desperation.

This is great news for sinners. We can come to Jesus with no spiritual resume, with no good track record, with no resources, with nothing that would make us important. But we can come with need and need alone and receive His forgiveness, his grace, and his perfect record of righteousness. If we'll just confess our sin, and turn, and trust, we will be welcomed in even if all we have is need.

No so far, that's good news to everybody, even if you're kind of a church insider. Most religious people I know are really glad to be helping the needy. They're really glad to see the redemption and change of a sinner who repents. They welcome those who turn to Jesus, regardless of their background.

We're really glad the kingdom has been opened to those people.

But then Jesus says something that may not be welcome news to religious insiders:

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

Jesus is not announcing here that he has expanded the welcome - that it isn't just for the good and the achievers but also for underachievers like little children.

He is saying, “It's only for the underachievers.”

Jesus isn't just expanding the kingdom to include people who could never merit it on their own. Jesus is saying the only ones who receive the kingdom are the ones who could never merit it on their own.

If you think you'll be welcomed by God the same way you're welcomed by the kingdoms of the world, you won't be welcomed at all.

If we think our sophistication, our knowledge, our money, our moral achievements, our strengths and abilities, our education, our great Christian works are what earn us a place in the kingdom of God, we will miss the kingdom of God.

In the kingdoms of the world, the achievers are in and the underachievers are out.

In the kingdom of God, the humble, the empty, the broken - those who realize they could never earn a spot in the kingdom own the whole thing.

The way up is down.

The way in is through acknowledging our failure to achieve. God is holy and perfect, and if we think our achievements usher us in to His kingdom we miss his kingdom.

Instead we acknowledge our sin.

We acknowledge that there is no way we could ever save ourselves or make ourselves worthy.

But we trust His worthiness. We trust that his sacrifice on the cross atoned for our sins. We repent and turn to Him in total trust.

Like a crying baby that is saying, "I can't do anything for myself," we say "When it comes to being in with God, I can't do anything."

I can achieve a lot in the world, I can do a lot of good, I can climb a lot of ladders, I can change a lot of things, but when it comes to being right with God I can't do anything.

And if we don't become like a child, we don't get a welcome into the kingdom of God.

Arrogance and swagger and spiritual pride is a key indicator that we don't know the Lord, because we must be humbled to be exalted by the Gospel.

God will only exalt those who have been humbled

Jesus is firstfruit of that:

Luke 18:31-34 And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, ^kwe are going up to Jerusalem, and ^leverything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be ^mdelivered over to the Gentiles and will be ⁿmocked and shamefully treated and ^ospit upon. ³³ And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on ^pthe third day he will rise." ³⁴ ^qBut they understood none of these things. ^rThis saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

The king will go to the smallest place, the most humble place, he will go to the cross and be crucified and be raised again by His Father. And all of his true followers likewise will go to the low place, will admit our need, and be raised to new life by the Father.

Luke 18:15-17 "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 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."

Study Guide
Luke 18:15-17
Like a Child

I. Children are Valued in the Kingdom of God (Luke 18:15-16)

What ways can individuals and churches welcome children?

Why is it so important for parents to bring their children to Jesus?

How can parents bring their children to Jesus?

II. People Like Children Are Welcome in the Kingdom of God (Luke 18:16)

How is it significant that people “such as” children are welcome in the kingdom of God?

Who are people “such as” children?

What characteristics of children make them candidates for the favor of God?

What characteristics of adults make them candidates for the favor of God?

III. Only People Like Children Are Welcome in the Kingdom of God (Luke 18:17)

How is the point made in verse 17 more offensive to many than the point made in verse 16?

In what ways might someone try to receive the kingdom in a non-childlike way?

In what ways are children the model for how to receive Christ?