

Like little children

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] Luke 18, 9 down to 30. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

[1 : 31] Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. A certain ruler asked him, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Why do you call me good? Jesus answered, no one is good except God alone. You know the commandments. You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. All these I have kept since I was a boy, he said.

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, you still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

Then come, follow me. When he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy.

Jesus looked at him and said, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

[2 : 37] Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. Those who heard this asked, who then can be saved?

Jesus replied, what is impossible with man is possible with God. Peter said to him, we have left all we had to follow you.

Truly, I tell you, Jesus said to them, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life.

Amen. I wonder how many of you have had the experience of being confident that you understand what is going on with something, that you understand perhaps a concept at school or something that you're meant to do at work or just how the world works, how nature fits together, of believing that you understand something and then someone says something that makes you realise that you had it completely back to front, that you never did understand at all and now you need to get a new perspective.

That seems to be the kind of the day that these disciples are having as we come to verses 15 and following. Remember, they heard Jesus say, verse 14, all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

[4 : 17] Duncan read those words for us a few minutes ago. And yet here in these three verses we're focused on today, in verses 15 to 17, here the disciples are stopping people bringing the little children, the humblest of people, one might think, stopping them being brought to Jesus.

Clearly, the disciples have not understood what Jesus is saying, have they? But Jesus is still teaching. Jesus is still explaining, explaining to them and explaining to us, explaining what the kingdom is like, explaining the terms of entry into the kingdom.

Now, perhaps for the disciples, it would have taken them a little while to get past the sting of being rebuked for trying to prevent the children from coming. But once they paused to see, once they get past the sting of the rebuke and think about what is being said, once they get to that stage, what a wonderful picture is before them.

What a beautiful saviour stands before their eyes. What a saviour who welcomes the lowest of the low. What a saviour who welcomes the one who comes in humility.

What a saviour who says, let the little children come to me. Layer by layer by layer, Luke is building up this portrait of who Jesus is.

[5 : 38] And isn't it a glorious picture? Isn't this a wonderful vision of our saviour that is being set before us? So yes, maybe our attitudes too might need to be corrected by these verses along with the disciples.

But if we do feel a little bit of painful correction, let's not lose sight of the context in which that correction comes. Let's keep our eyes fixed on the beauty of Christ that we might be compelled to draw near to him.

So in these brief verses, we're going to see first the approachability of Jesus. Then the warning, do not prevent others from coming. And then thirdly, the invitation to come like little children.

So first, the approachability of Jesus. It's implicit, isn't it? It's kind of there in the background that there's something about Jesus, something in his manner, something in how he looks, something in how he behaves.

But makes the parents think that they can come. Makes them believe that they will be welcome to come with their babies. And that is a surprising thing. I mean, maybe today we're quite familiar with the rather cliched idea of the politicians going around kissing babies on the campaign trail.

[6 : 55] Might be a while before that comes back, wouldn't it? But we certainly have, in general, we have this very warm idea of children as a society. That children are precious.

Children are to be protected. You know, first to the lifeboats, the women and the children.

Everybody wants to be seen to have a positive attitude to children and families.

But it was not always this way. It wasn't this way in Jesus' day. Massively higher infant mortality certainly played its part in the attitude to children.

But even more fundamentally, you're in this society that is very ordered, very hierarchical, a clear sense of the pecking order. Who ranks higher and lower than whom?

And children are really quite low down in that pecking order. Children aren't worth spending time on. What advantage can they possibly offer you?

[7 : 51] What benefit will accrue to you from time in the company of little children? You don't gain social capital by going and spending time with the lowly. Now, your standing goes up as you spend time in lofty company.

And therefore, nobody expects a respected teacher to choose to spend time with little children. And in that culture, in that context, with that attitude in the world around them, clearly there's something in Jesus that makes people think here is somebody different.

Here is a man of obviously high status, a respected teacher, and yet who's going to welcome me to bring my children to him? Maybe the parents have heard about how Jesus spent time with sinners and tax collectors.

Maybe they know he hasn't shunned the company of lepers. I mean, they're even lower status than children. Maybe they know that Jesus has healed the blind and the lame. And of course, as the next parent sees the response to the first child, then they're further emboldened.

There's something different about Jesus. something approachable, something that shows that he has time for you, something that says he's willing to spend time with those who others disregard.

[9 : 12] Now, two things that I think we should take away from this picture of the approachability of Jesus. First thing, firstly, he hasn't changed.

Jesus is the same today as he was then. He still welcomes everyone who comes. He still has time for those who nobody else cares about. So my friends, don't ever think that you are not worth his time.

Don't ever think that you will weary Jesus by coming to him again and again in prayer. Don't ever think that you are too lowly, too insignificant for him to be interested in.

Your Savior is approachable to all. That's the first thing. He is approachable to you. Secondly, there's a model here, isn't there?

A model for you and for me. Here is a picture of what we ought to be like. If we want to claim to be following in Jesus' footsteps, well, these are the footsteps that we need to follow in.

[10:14] Here's a model of approachability for you and for me. Shouldn't we also be this way? Shouldn't we, likewise, have time for those who have nothing to offer us? Shouldn't we be spending time with those who society treats as irrelevant?

There's something offensive, isn't there, about a church minister who seems to only have time for the great and the good. Someone who, if he does spend time with you, makes it abundantly clear his time is far more valuable than yours.

Thank you very much. He'll keep you waiting as much as he likes but make his displeasure readily apparent if you have the temerity to be a few minutes late. And there's something wrong about the church elder who in a crowded gathering seeks out the company of those who have something to offer, looking for somebody whose company will increase their social standing.

This is especially true of those who hold office in the church, I think. It should be a red flag to us if we're thinking about who to ordain as elders, who to put forward for training for ministry.

In due course, when you consider who your next pastor might be. For that matter, maybe it's something that you need to lovingly rebuke your current minister and elders if you see this attitude in us.

[11:34] This is especially true of church officers that we must follow Jesus' model of approachability. Especially true of us, but isn't this also to be expected of us all?

Aren't we all trying to follow in our Savior's footsteps? Is it not therefore the case that we all would seek to spend time with the meek and the lowly?

Yes, yes, it's true. We all have finite time. We cannot spend time with everybody. But when we're figuring out how we spend that time, let's not buy into the same method of prioritization as the world around us.

Let's not prioritize those who have something to offer us. No, instead, let's follow the example of our Savior who was visibly approachable even to the little children.

The approachability of Jesus. Second heading, don't prevent others from coming. So we're coming to the reaction of the disciples and how Jesus rebukes them for it. Luke tells us, verse 15, when the disciples saw people bringing babies to Jesus, they rebuked these parents.

[12:50] Why? Presumably because the disciples, in this at least, shared the priorities, the attitudes of their age. Presumably because despite having seen how Jesus treated the lowly and the outcast as they journeyed on together.

Presumably because the disciples hadn't really understood. Presumably because they thought Jesus was too busy. They thought Jesus was too tired to be bothered by little children.

Presumably they thought these children too insignificant for the Master's notice. The attitude of these disciples is somewhat akin to that of Abraham Lincoln's wife, Mary.

Mary once complained to the newspaper man about her husband saying, he's so like a child I sometimes wonder if he understands even that he is the President. I cannot teach him.

He will see them all. Servants. Washer women. Anyone. He talks with anyone who will come. The office hunters. The women with dead or wounded boys and the more ragged they are the longer he will sit and hear them.

[14:00] Mary was frustrated with him for it but what finer words could be said about a President than that he had time for the lowliest. That he sat and heard the most ragged members of society.

She wanted to stop them coming. She wanted to deny them access just like the disciples were ready to deny these children access to their Master but Jesus told them not to hinder the children. Mark in his account of the same incident he says Jesus was indignant with his disciples. Jesus was indignant with them so let's not follow in their footsteps. let's not put up barriers to coming to Jesus. First then let's watch out for the little children shall we? On the one hand we live in a society that values children very highly but there are still significant exceptions to that.

Other countries that have a very different attitude to children but closer to home as well. how highly do we ourselves value children?

[15:10] What about our attitude our mental approach our behavioural approach to the number of children looked after by the local authority?

How does our attitude to that reflect our value of children? Does it show that we value children as highly as God does? Maybe that's something that some of us should seriously prayerfully and

practically consider.

And then alongside that we come to the fact that our society continues to treat unborn children as subhuman as disposable commodities.

That should be a matter for regular prayer shouldn't it? It should have an impact on how we vote shouldn't it? We can't be content with a society that pretends to value children and yet fails to actually do so inside or outside the womb.

The church therefore should be a place where somebody who is terrified by bringing a child into the world the church should be a place where that person can come and find support.

[16:26] Would she find that support if she came here to us? Or would she feel uncomfortable, excluded? Do we do all that we could to convey that that support would be forthcoming?

We're called to value children as our Savior does. Second, let's recognize the force of Jesus saying the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

We're going to come in a moment to the implications of verse 17 for the attitude with which all of us come, but let's not spiritualize this too soon, shall we? Because Jesus does actually mean what he says.

He means it is at least possible for at least some children to be subjects of the king. This is obvious, right? It is possible for children to belong to the kingdom.

And this needs to be said. So parents, don't think that your children are too young to really be Christians. Don't think that their faith doesn't count.

[17:35] Don't think they need to grow up before they can really be part of the kingdom, fully part of the church. This passage is not sufficient to make a theological case for the validity of infant baptism, but it does offer a response to a few objections, and it certainly militates against setting a kind of minimum age requirement for faith.

On the strength of passages like this one, therefore, covenant church with the rest of our denomination, we recognize the children of church members as members of the church, albeit not communicant members, but members all the same.

Parents, do not think your children are too young to be part of the kingdom. Having spoken to the parents, let me speak to you directly to any children listening to me wherever you might be.

Boys and girls, you are not too young to come to Jesus. Jesus loves little children. Jesus welcomes babies.

If anybody has ever made you think that you need to be more grown up before you can be a Christian, I'm sorry about that, because it's not true. You don't have to wait.

[18:53] You can trust in Jesus right now, today. If you trust Jesus, that's great. If you know that you do things wrong, and you're sorry for doing those things, and you want Jesus to forgive you, well, he will.

If you believe that God cares about you, that's true, he does. So talk to your mums and dads today, come and talk to me. You do not have to wait to be part of the kingdom of God.

parents, children, some of you who don't want to call yourselves children anymore, some of you teenagers, maybe some of you are still waiting till you think you're grown up enough.

maybe some of you are holding back out of fear. Maybe you're not sure. That's okay to be cautious, but this matters a great deal, and there is not a minimum age.

So if you are ready to put your trust in Jesus, then do it. Trust him today. And it's good to do that officially too. It'd be good to come and talk to me or to one of the elders to formally profess your faith, as we call it, and to become a communicant member of the church.

[20:09] I would love to talk to you about that. Whether you're young or old, I'd love to talk to you about that. If you're never too young, well, you are never too old either. And that brings us to verse 17.

In what manner do we come to Christ? Young or old? How do we come? Well, Jesus again says that the means of entering the kingdom of God is not what we might be inclined to expect.

Now, heading three, the call is come like little children. Jesus says, truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

Therefore, therefore you and I, if we want to be in the kingdom of God, we must enter like little children. That is what Jesus says. Whatever our age might be, we come like little children.

Now, what does Jesus mean by saying come like children? First, let's be clear, one thing he's not saying, childlike is not the same as childish. What Jesus says here, to come like little children, this

has to be compatible with what Paul writes to the Corinthians.

[21 : 24] He says, when I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. Paul's talking about maturing in the Christian life, and Jesus certainly isn't saying here that we should be disinterested in growing.

He isn't denying the value of pressing in, of investigating the intricacies of God's revelation. We should be growing in maturity. Jesus doesn't commend being childish, but he does want us to be childlike.

Now, people writing about these few verses, they mostly seem very keen to pick their one favorite idea of what children are like, and then argue that's what Jesus means, to the exclusion of any other dimension of it.

But there seems to be so little agreement between different people commenting on it, and I find it so hard to be compelled by any of their reasons to reject one virtue or another.

It seems best to me to at least consider the value of each of a number of different virtues. And the first commendable virtue here would seem to be humility.

[22 : 39] I mean, yes, children do learn to boast quite quickly. My boys can tell you very clearly who is the fastest runner, thank you very much, and who is the best at whatever and whatever.

But, Luke, Luke's talking here about babies. He doesn't use the word for children, he uses the word for infants, for babies. Jesus is talking about very young children in terms of our attitude with which we come.

Now, infants are not known for their pride, and certainly as we've seen, the society of the time sees these infants, and yes, even the older children sees them as very lowly.

And therefore, I think it's legitimate to see at least some level of commendation of humility here.

Jesus commends coming humbly. But we focused on that last week, didn't we?

We looked at the Pharisee and the tax collector and we thought about humility, so I'm not going to labor that point any further. We've got enough other things to be going on with. Second virtue of a child, utter dependence.

[23 : 45] Maybe not what we would classically call a virtue, is it? Dependence. Not dependability, dependence. The fact that they depend on others. Not a classic virtue, but certainly characteristic of infants, of young children, of babies.

Babies are utterly helpless, right? There's nothing they can do to help themselves beyond, I suppose, wailing and hoping that somebody will intervene. Jesus commends that attitude in us. If you wish to enter the kingdom of God, you do it recognizing that you can't contribute anything to your salvation. If you want to come to Christ, you do it recognizing that you are dependent on mercy.

If you want to put it very bluntly, a baby left on its own will soon enough perish. The same is true of you and me. We cannot do anything to prolong our lives.

We cannot do anything to improve our eternal destiny. If anything, we can do exactly the same as the baby. We can cry for help. We can acknowledge our need.

[24 : 56] Augustus Top Lady says it well, naked come to thee for dress, helpless look to thee for grace, vile I to the fountain fly, wash me savior or I die.

Dependence. Third virtue, absolute trust. A baby is not suspicious of its parents. He doesn't imagine they're out to get him.

She doesn't doubt their love. As they grow, yes, children start to defy their parents. At some stage, sadly, they might start to doubt whether their parents are seeking their good.

But it doesn't start out that way. It starts with absolute trust. And Jesus charges us to approach God like babies approach their parents.

R.C. Sproul is helpful on this one. He says it means to trust God implicitly, to believe that he cares for us, and that he keeps his promises even if we don't understand all that he's doing.

[25 : 58] We ought not to trust pastors implicitly. We ought not to trust the church implicitly. We ought not to trust the government implicitly. But we must trust God implicitly.

And that implicit trust God. That means taking God at his word, doesn't it? It means believing what he says instead of employing a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Eve's first foundational mistake, not trusting what God said, not believing him. Eve believed Satan's lies in place of God's truth.

She failed to implicitly trust God. And we often follow in her footsteps today. We believe Satan when he says, here's a better way to live.

Here's something you'll enjoy more. Here's the true path to life. Here's the real route to happiness.

We believe Satan when he tells us that God's rules are there to ruin our fun.

[26 : 58] We believe him when he says, God is not on our side. We believe him when we start to doubt God. Well, Jesus says we need the attitude of an infant.

we need that attitude of implicit trust. The child that believes what his parents say, that believes that they know best, we trust God to tell us how to live.

And then kind of another dimension of the same thing is that we also need that implicit trust when it comes to God saying that forgiveness is possible.

Because again, Satan tells us lies. Satan tells us we've messed up too many times. Satan says this sin is too serious, God won't forgive you.

The great deceiver wants us to believe that God doesn't want us back. But Jesus says we need the implicit trust of a baby. And that means we trust God when he says, 1 John chapter 1, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

[28 : 14] The implicit trust that believes God when he says he will forgive. N.T. Wright summarizes well on this one. He says Jesus sees to the heart of what it means to receive God's kingdom.

It's like drinking in one's mother's milk. It's like learning to see and learning to smile by looking at one's mother's eyes and face.

I love the way he phrases that because it's not a series of propositions. It's an invitation, isn't it? It's a beautiful picture of what this is like.

Jesus says, come to God, come to the kingdom of God like little children. My friends, that is the invitation this morning. receive the kingdom of God like a little child because that is the only way to enter it.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you that you welcome us to come to you.

[29 : 25] Thank you that you are gloriously approachable, that there are no barriers, no barriers of age, no barriers of race, no values, no barriers of any kind that we might seek to erect, no barriers in coming to you.

Thank you that you welcome us to come like little children with this faith, this trust, this humility that depends on what you have said, that acknowledges that you alone are God, that you do know what is best for us, and that you will indeed forgive us.

Lord Jesus, we know we need that forgiveness even this morning, that we have, even in the few hours already today, that we have fallen short, and so we come in humble trust, we come in dependence upon you, we come seeking mercy, believing in your grace.

Amen.