

Let Them Come!

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[0 : 00] Let them come. What kind of Savior is Jesus? Over the last number of years, it's become apparent that certain figures in the worldwide church have been responsible for the abuse of children.

! Be it physical, mental, or emotional, these figures abused their powers and ruined the lives of the children under their care.

It has led to a widespread suspicion in society that their children may not be safe in church. Of course, the statistics would suggest that children are entirely as safe in church as they are in the world, safer in fact, but the media takes delight, of course, in the church's dirty secrets.

Although it at times might seem like overkill, that's why we take safeguarding so seriously in our church, because children, of all people, must be safe here.

We utterly deplore the actions of those in the church who have taken advantage of their position to abuse children under their care. We hate that action because they're the polar opposite of the attitude of the Jesus they claim to follow.

[1 : 16] Both Jesus' attitude to children and his attitude to how Christian salvation works. The fate of child abusers in the church is well known.

They are exposed, they are charged, and punished by the police and the judiciary. The fate of child abusers at the hands of God is another matter.

What kind of savior is Jesus? A savior to whom the vulnerable and fragile, the children can come and experience genuine love, acceptance, and belonging.

A savior who holds children up as the model for how we are to receive Christian salvation. A savior who prioritizes children and places their needs above those of the more able.

From these verses in Luke 18, I want us to consider two main points. First, two responses to children, and secondly, one way of salvation.

[2 : 25] Two responses to children, one way of salvation. And after considering these points, I just want to make one or two applications. Blessed are the children among us, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

Two responses to children, first of all. Our passage is situated in a larger section of Luke's gospel where Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem.

He's surrounded by large crowds, and among these crowds are people taking their infants to Jesus, that he might touch them. When they saw it, the disciples decided to act as Jesus' bodyguards, rebuke those taking their little children to Jesus.

Jesus, seeing what his disciples are doing, calls them to him and says, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.

Now, it's clear from the words Luke is using that the children who were being brought to Jesus were very, very young. Some were babies, some were infants, probably some others below the age of 10 years old.

[3 : 32] So, about the same age, perhaps, as Finn and Xander there. The disciples wanted them to disappear. But Jesus, their master, had these little children in his heart.

So, there's two responses to Jesus. One rejecting, one accepting. The disciples rejected them, Jesus accepted them. Recently, I heard of an older man who left our church to go to another church.

And he said to someone that the reason he left our church was because there were too many children here. There may be legitimate reasons to leave.

Our church. But that is not one of them. It constitutes a rejection of children, on account of which Jesus rebuked his disciples.

A rejection of children in the church is deeply unchristian and deeply unchristlike. Perhaps, though, we can understand why the disciples at this point wanted to keep children away from Jesus.

[4 : 37] He's on his way to Jerusalem. He's been in fierce conflict with the Jewish religious leaders. In the previous passage, Jesus has held up the prayers of a tax collector as an example to follow.

And the prayers of a Pharisee as an example to avoid. Jesus has got important things to do. In the minds of his disciples, the climax of the Messiah's journey will soon come.

He will march and triumph into Jerusalem. By popular rebellion, take the throne of Israel and lead Israel's armies to war against the Romans. Oh, he's far too bothered, far too busy to be bothered by children.

Now, when I was growing up, of course, the stock phrase was, children should be seen and not heard. But back in Jesus' day, children were treated altogether more shamefully.

They had no status in society at all. They contributed nothing. Infant mortality was shockingly high. Children were neither seen nor heard in Jesus' day. They had no power, no wealth, no influence.

[5 : 38] One may therefore understand why the disciples rebuked parents for taking their children to Jesus. Don't bother the master with your brats, they might have said. He's got far more important people to talk to and things to do.

Now, the tables may now have turned and children are afforded far too much prominence. Parents often idolize their children and pander to their every childish whim. We've all seen Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.

Spoilt child Veruca Salt demands of her father saying, I want an Oompa Loompa now, Daddy. But it was very different in Jesus' day.

Children had nothing. Children were nothing. Don't bother Jesus with children. He's got far more important things to deal with. Are there ways in which we subtly, unconsciously reject our children? Come home from a busy day's work at the office, confronted by our children, clamoring for our attention. Trust me, I've done this loads of times. Rather than focus on them, we angrily dismiss them and tell them, we've been doing important things all day.

[6 : 50] We're too tired for their nonsense. After dinner, we boot up our laptops and catch up with more work. We don't even put our children to bed and read them a story.

Just too busy for them. Are there ways in which we subtly, unconsciously reject our children in the church? You know, we call them the church of tomorrow without realizing that actually, according to Jesus, they're the church of today.

Do we take them seriously as individuals, learning about what makes them happy, about what makes them sad? Do we take their discipleship seriously, or do we think that 30 minutes of a God slot at Sunday school a week is enough for them?

Do we make any real effort to get to know them? Do we pray for them? Rejecting children is not merely a matter of acting like the disciples, positively keeping them away from Jesus.

Rejecting children can also involve our neglecting our Christian duties of treating them like equals, giving them our time and energy, and failing to disciple them toward Jesus.

[7 : 58] In that respect, I guess we've all got to hang our heads in shame and confess. We've been guilty at times of not taking our children seriously enough.

I may even dare to say that a church with no children, for all that may be theologically orthodox and evangelically, evangelistically rich, is not a New Testament church at all.

By contrast, Jesus' attitude to children is diametrically opposed to that of his disciples. We read, But Jesus called them to him, saying, Let the little children come to be, and do not hinder them.

You see, in Jesus' estimation, these children were entirely as important, if not more so, than the religious leaders of Israel. As Messiah, Jesus had come for all the lost sheep, not just for those of maturer years.

The children had as much right to come to him as everyone else. Jesus knew that he was making his way to Jerusalem, not to the climax of a worldly throne, but to the pain of a Roman cross.

[9 : 07] He only has a limited time before he leaves this world. But such is his understanding of the human mind, psyche, and heart, at every stage of its development, that not only does he permit the children to come to him, but he tells the disciples not to hinder them.

Don't put any obstacles in the way of them coming to me. Now, of course, he couldn't sing it now, but when I was a child, I'm sure he knew it as well.

I was taught the children hymn. Jesus loves little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white. All are precious in his sight.

Jesus loves the little children of the world. Andrew Boner was a great 19th century Free Church Glasgow minister.

He was a prominent churchman, a skilled linguist in Hebrew and Greek, and the pastor of a congregation of over 1,000 people in Finiston, Kelvin Grove. Little known, however, was Andrew Boner's passion for children.

[10:17] He arranged in his church children's services at which he would preach. He prepared coursework for them and got to know them as individuals. He knew their names. 200 years earlier, during the days of the Covenanters, children's prayer meetings were common, with Christian children arranging themselves and leading their own prayer meetings.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism was specifically designed for children. Historically, through its theology and practice, the Deformed Evangelical Church did everything it could to include children in the life of the discipleship of the church.

We, as Crowley Free Church, must take this aspect of our ministry very seriously indeed. It is a matter of deep regret that the Free Church has lost so many of its children over the years.

If we are unwilling to invest in ministry to children in our church, we must reassess our priorities. We might spend tens of thousands of pounds on ministry to outsiders, but at the same time, pennies on our own covenant children.

Is this not wrong-headed? And the opposite of Jesus' attitude to infants. So, objection or acceptance? The way of the disciple or the way of Jesus?

[11:47] Which shall we choose? Two responses to children. And then second, one way of salvation.

One way of salvation. One of the reasons that Jesus receives these children and infants to him is because he wants to hold them up as examples of those to whom the kingdom of God belongs.

He says, let the children come to me. Do not hinder them, for to such belong the kingdom of God.

Truly I say to you that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

You see, this is a passage not merely about children in the church, but the way of salvation itself. If anyone wants to belong to the kingdom of God, if they want to be a Christian, they need to receive the kingdom of God like a child.

To put it another way, unless they receive the kingdom of God like a child, they will never enter it. It is impossible to enter into God's kingdom.

[12:52] It's impossible to be a Christian unless we receive it like a child. The key word here is receive. Receive. In the passage we studied last week, that of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Pharisee prayed about himself thinking that by his own religious devotion, he could earn God's favor.

The idea that he might receive God's salvation as a gift did not enter his mind. The thought he could earn it for himself, that by his religion he deserved it, that's how he thought.

By contrast, the sinful tax collector stood at a distance, beat his breast, and cried out, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. He knew he had nothing to offer God, could not earn forgiveness and salvation, so cried out to God for grace and received it.

And we read that he went down from the temple justified, right with God. The Pharisee tried to earn God's favor and did not receive it. The unworthy tax collector received God's kingdom and entered it.

Now in our passage, unbeknown to the disciples, Jesus is teaching us again who belongs to the kingdom of God. Those who, to use Jesus' words, are justified unright with God.

[14:12] They're not the worthy, but the unworthy. Not the deserving, but the undeserving. Not the significant, but the insignificant.

Not those who have earned it, but those who have received it. Children earn nothing from their parents. They receive it because their parents love them.

They do not earn their keep. They receive it out of love. It is precisely because they cannot earn their place in the family that they belong to the family. They receive their belonging.

They do not earn their belonging. Just like the tax collector who did not earn justification from God, just as children do not earn their place in a family, so the key to understanding Christian salvation is that none of us earn our place in the kingdom of God.

If we are to be saved, we must receive it freely as a gift of God's love and grace. It is not, and has never been, about what we do for God, but about what God has done for us.

[15 : 22] It is not, and has never been, about what we offer God, but what He offers us. He offers us the kingdom. He offers us salvation.

And all He asks is that we receive it like a child, like Finn and Xander did those chocolate biscuits. The same Jesus who spoke these words to His disciples will soon offer Himself as the sacrifice on the cross to take away the sins of the world.

And all we need do to be saved is by faith receive Jesus and rest in Him alone for our salvation. To belong to the kingdom of God is to receive it as a child.

There can be no pride or boasting in Christian salvation precisely because we receive it as a gift and not as something we earn or deserve. We cannot look down on another Christian because everything we have has been received as a gift.

The most important element of this passage is not necessarily its teaching on the place of children in the church but on the centrality, the nature, and the recipients of Christian salvation.

[16 : 35] Are we too proud to receive the kingdom of God as a gift? That we don't have to earn, we don't have to deserve, and don't have to be worthy of.

Then we shall never enter it. The invitation is given freely to all of us here today, from the youngest to the oldest, to receive the sacrifice of Christ as a gift of a loving Father by faith.

As a minister friend of mine who you'll all know by this saying often says, it's not rocket science. Christian faith really is so very simple. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

Are there any here today who have been under for their whole lives the misconception that they must do religious things to earn God's favor?

He changed today. If children receive everything from their parents, so to be saved, you must receive everything from God. We talk about older people who are becoming absent-minded as reverting to their second childhood.

[17 : 42] Are there any here today who are willing to divert to a second childhood so they may enter the kingdom of God? Are there any here who are willing to believe in Christ and receive Christ for themselves, to receive and rest in Him alone for salvation?

I want to close today by applying this passage in four brief directions. First, your attitude to children tells you about your attitude to salvation.

Your attitude to children will tell you about your attitude to salvation. Diagnostic tool. Those like that of the elder gentleman who I spoke about earlier on who left our church who reject or belittle children in the church and treat them as less important than they are show that they have not understood the very foundations of the gospel of Christian salvation.

They reveal an attitude of legalism thinking that their status secures their salvation and their goodness secures their entrance into the kingdom of God and their religious devotion secures their belonging into the church.

In my experience, the more mature a Christian becomes, the more seriously they take the spiritual interests of the children of the church.

[19 : 13] Precisely because they have become increasingly aware that everything they have as Christians has not been earned, but they've received it as a gift of the grace of God.

So you see, your attitude to children in the church especially will tell you much about your attitude to salvation. Second, bring your children to Jesus.

Bring your children to Jesus. We do not know those who brought their children to Jesus. We don't know who they were in this passage. They may have been parents or relatives or grandparents or guardians, but what they did was bring their infants to Jesus.

The greatest gift they could give was to bring their children to Jesus. It's a greater gift than to give them the opportunity to go to the finest universities, to own their own homes, to drive the best cars. To bring them to the only place they can receive eternal life is to give them the greatest gift of all. Now I'm not just talking about bringing them to church, talking about something far deeper.

[20 : 22] The whole direction of our lives as parents and grandparents must be to bring them to Jesus. By our example, by our devotion, by our repentance, by our lives at home, bring your children to Jesus.

As I once said many years ago back in St. Vin, the church has your children for half an hour in Sunday school a week. But we as parents or grandparents have them for 167 and a half hours a

week.

upon whom there is the greater responsibility for bringing our children to Jesus. The church or the family. Please fulfill your love to your children by bringing them to Jesus.

Third application. An early example of infant baptism. Question mark. Luke is extremely careful with the words he uses in this passage.

Jesus says, let little children come to me and do not hinder them. Now, the key word is hinder. In Acts chapter 8 and verse 36 in the context of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, the eunuch famously asks Philip the evangelist, this is Acts 8:36, see, here is water, what prevents or hinders me from being baptized?

[22 : 05] Same Greek word. Again, in Acts chapter 10, verse 47, Acts 10, 47, in the context of the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius being saved, Peter asks, can anyone withhold, hinder, same Greek word, water for baptizing these people?

I would suggest that hinder seems to be a word Luke associates with Christian baptism. I'm not saying this for certain, you're very free to disagree with me, but it seems that by deliberately using the word hinder in this passage concerning how Jesus receives children, there may be an authentic reference to the practice of infant baptism, of covenant children being officially declared as belonging to the kingdom of God by virtue of them being brought by their Christian parents to Jesus.

There is no record of Jesus baptizing infants, but there's no record of Jesus not baptizing infants. There are New Testament records of household baptisms, but the use of the word hinder here may add to the cumulative evidence from the Bible of the historic Orthodox Catholic Reformed position of baptizing our covenant children.

Last application before I get eggs and things thrown at me. there is no one insignificant in God's kingdom.

There is no one insignificant in God's kingdom. In the 1640s, our Reformed fathers gathered in Westminster and drew up many documents which shape and express our faith as Christians.

[24 : 02] One of those was the Shorter Catechism. These great theologians drew up the Shorter Catechism and I quote, to be a directory for catechizing such as are of weaker capacity.

To be a directory for catechizing such as are of weaker capacity. Now they weren't really referring here to infants, but to those who had learning difficulties, what we might call today unidivergent. We might consider such in the church as being fairly insignificant. They cost more than they give. They contribute nothing. But they were precious to our fathers in Westminster because first and foremost they were precious to Jesus.

There are no insignificant people in this church. Our safeguarding policies are designed not just to protect our children, but anyone who is vulnerable.

We must reassess our view of significance. Perhaps the most important person in this church isn't the most prominent, the most gifted, and the wealthiest, but the most insignificant, the neediest, and the person who's got the least to give or to offer.

[25 : 18] That seems to be the trajectory of Jesus' teaching in this passage. Jesus' teaching here, as in many other places, and his teaching turns the world, the values of the world, on their heads.

There is no one insignificant in the kingdom of God. No one. You might feel that you're not important in the eyes of the world. You might feel that you've got nothing to offer God.

That's good, because the reality is that none of us has anything to offer God except our weakness, our need, and our sin. Unless we become like little children, and like Finn and Xander running up to get their chocolate biscuit without thinking how much it would cost them.

Unless we become like little children, and receive the kingdom of God by faith in Christ, we shall never enter it. We're invited today to return to our second childhood, and without being childish, be childlike.

By faith, rest upon and receive God's gift of his son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

[26 : 31] Amen.