

Receiving the kingdom and being like a child

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Preacher: Mark Fossey

[0 : 00] Today's Bible reading is taken from the Gospel of Mark chapter 9 verses 30 to 50 and can be found on page 1019 of the Church Bible. They went on from there and passed through Galilee and he did not want anyone to know for he was teaching his disciples saying to them the son of man is going to be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill him and when he is killed after three days he will rise. But they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him and they came to Campanio and when he was in the house he asked them what were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest and he sat down and called the twelve and he said to them if anyone would be first he must be last of all and servant of all. And he took a child and put him in the midst of them and taking him in his arms he said to them whoever receives one such child in my name receives me and whoever receives me receives not me but him who sent me. John said to him teacher we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not following us. But Jesus said do not stop him for no one who dies a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

And if your hand causes you to sin cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell to the unquenchable fire.

And if your foot causes you to sin cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin tear it out.

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell. Where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

[3 : 10] For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good. But if the salt has lost its saltiness. How will you make it salty again?

Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another. Amen. Thank you very much Victoria. That's very well read.

Well let me add my welcome to Simon's earlier. My name is Mark Fossey. I'm the Assistant Minister here at the church. And it's great to see many guests, friends and family of little Lucy Price. We hope you enjoy yourselves today.

And we do very much thank God for her. And in God's kindness, if you like, on the day, not only have we got Lucy's Thanksgiving and Father's Day, but we've been working our way through Mark's Gospel.

And this morning's talk is all about children. So there you are. That's perfect, isn't it? But of course, interestingly, what we'll find out as we go through it is that although the topic is children, the subject is us.

[4 : 09] It's as if Jesus takes the opportunity of the children around him for us to look at the children, but to teach something about us, about the nature of what it means to be a Christian, of what it means to come into the kingdom of God, and what it means to go on being a Christian.

And children are the example. It's a very surprising thing. Let's have a look and see what he says. Have a look down, if you'd like to keep that passage open that we've just read from Mark chapter 9 on page 1019.

And at this point in the Gospel of Mark's account of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, Jesus is going to Jerusalem. Jerusalem's in the south, they're in the north. He's coming down the M1, if you

like, to the capital city, Jerusalem.

But the reason Jesus is going to Jerusalem, as he's been teaching them time and time again, is he's going there to die. He knows that when he gets there, he's going to die. Look at verse 30. They went on there and passed through Galilee in the north, and they didn't want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, and this is what he's teaching them, the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they'll kill him.

And when he's killed, after three days, he'll rise again. That's what he's teaching them. So it's a pretty morbid journey. He's going to a place they know he's going to die. And they don't understand this, it says there in verse 32.

[5 : 29] But you see, the reason he's teaching them this is not only is he going to die for them, for all Christians, but as they go on the way, following him on the road, he's teaching them what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Metaphorically, following Jesus is going to, well, in his case, Jesus is going to die for the sake of others, out of love to serve others.

And being a follower of Jesus, as we're going to find out, is lovingly serving other people. It's being like him. Jesus walked the walk and talked the talk. And being a follower of Jesus is like the disciples, if you imagine, following him on that road, serving others rather than living for my own glory.

Think about Jesus, you see. He was God on earth. And when Jesus came to earth, he didn't come to be a top celebrity or a CEO of a multinational or a famous ruler or a king.

He came actually just as a normal man to die for all of us. That whoever trusts in him might have eternal life, might live in the kingdom of God, as Simon was saying earlier. But the disciples don't get this.

[6 : 35] They don't get the idea of being a follower of Jesus is being a servant of others. Because that's what it says in verse 32. Do you see that? They didn't understand the saying and were afraid to ask him. So let's see if we understand, if we get this.

The first point, and I'm making this talk, and if you'd like, you can follow it through actually on the back of the service sheet. There's three points to follow through. The first point is this. Whoever serves Jesus' children, that's Christians, will be rewarded in the kingdom of God.

We actually get two accounts which are basically teaching the same thing. The two accounts both have a debate where the disciples are thinking they're important. They should be followed. Jesus rebukes them and says, no, it's not about being great here.

It's about being a servant of others. And that's how he's going to teach in both these instances.

Let's look at each one in turn and I'll show you what I mean. So on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus' disciples are debating about who's the greatest.

Have a look at verse 33. When they came to Capernaum, he was in the house. He asked them, guys, what were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent. No one said anything. For they knew on the way they'd argued with one another about who was the greatest.

[7 : 43] It's a bit like the boardroom in *The Apprentice*. Me and my wife love *The Apprentice*. I don't know if you watch it. But in *The Apprentice*, they're in the boardroom and they're all pushing themselves forward and trying to say to Sir Alan, you know, Lord Alan, sorry, why they should be the apprentice and why the others have failed and were miserable in this task.

And that's exactly what the disciples are doing here. But I actually think in one way or another, we're not quite as crass as they are on *The Apprentice*. It's great TV, isn't it? But in our own ways, society runs on wanting to be the greatest and wanting to be comparatively at least as good, if not better, than others.

You know, we'd be mortified, wouldn't we, if our children were worse behaved in front of others or were doing worse at school than our peers. We all want better homes than others.

We want better jobs than others. Many of us are in jobs which are ranked, aren't they? You're on a kind of pay grade if you're a teacher or a lawyer or you work in almost accountancy.

They're all, you know, you know your pay grade, you know your scale. There's a kind of caste system in many people's jobs. Everyone knows who's where. And the only way is up. It's either up or out. Everyone wants to be great.

[8 : 52] Everyone wants others to think you've made it, you've done it, you've achieved. But Jesus, unlike the disciples, didn't come to earth as God to be great.

He came to earth to serve and that's what he teaches them. Have a look down at verse 35. In God's kingdom, he says, if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.

See, Jesus inverts the way we think, see? Lord Sugar picks the candidate that is first, he's the best one, the smartest, the brainiest, the cleverest in business, to be great in his business empire.

Jesus picks the person who would make themselves last, who would be the person who serves others out of love, to be great in his kingdom. And just as Lord Sugar serves as the personal example of greatness here for his kingdom.

You know, there he is in his Rolls Royce, with his suit, with his lackeys either side of him, looking great, got the fancy title. Jesus, who was God, let's face it, that's a lot more important than Lord Alan Sugar.

[10:00] He dressed simply, he did not have a house, and he was mocked by people, and he went to death for the sake of others. Do you see how Lord Sugar epitomises, I think, the way our world thinks, greatness here.

But Jesus epitomises the kingdom of God. No, no, no, serving others is what's most important.

Which is why, actually, Christians can be important in business or in society in different ways.

But Christians aren't aspiring to greatness for greatness's sake, so that others think, wow, you're great. Christians are people who want to serve others, and if they're in positions of exalted greatness, it's for the sake of serving others.

Do you know, the word vicar comes from the word vicarious, which is to serve others. Or the word minister is to minister, to serve others. Positions of authority, in any sense, are for serving.

That's what ministers in the government are supposed to be doing. They're meant to be public servants, aren't they? So the thing is, you haven't made it in the kingdom of God, if you have a senior job, or the most intelligent kids, or the biggest house.

[11:08] In God's kingdom, you've made it, not if you've become the greatest here, but have sought to make yourself the servant of most, of others, and particularly Christians, actually. And Jesus illustrates this by taking a child.

Imagine he takes little Lucy Price. This is what he says in verse 36. He takes little Lucy, he takes a child, and he puts her in the midst of them, and taking her in his arms, he hugs her, and he says to us, whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me.

And whoever receives me, receives not me, but the one who sent me. That's God. If you want to be in God's kingdom, you need to be associated with Jesus. And if you want to be received by Jesus, you need to receive a child in his name, his children.

See, the point is, it's not about being nice to children, or going over children. That's not what he's saying to enter the kingdom of God. He's talking about his children, his people. On Father's Day, it's as if God is our Father.

Jesus is our Father, and we are his children. He says it in verse 42. Do you notice? He talks about these little ones who believe in me. He thinks of his disciples as his followers, Christians, as his children.

[12:22] And we're the ones who follow him. So in other words, he's saying, receive a child. In other words, serve a child. Just as you receive someone into your home, you're being hospitable, you're serving them.

He's saying, receive, serve other Christians. You Christians, if you're in the kingdom of God, what you do to be great in the kingdom of God is serve your brothers and sisters out of love. Because that's what I'm doing, Jesus says.

It's a child in my name, he puts it in verse 37. Now look, before I apply this, the next account is exactly the same, but slightly different.

Let me read from verse 38. This is a different debate. John said to him in verse 38, teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him. Why? Because he wasn't following us.

Exactly the same idea. This time it's not a disciple, it's some unknown other exorcist kind of guy. But John's saying, they should be following us. We're great in the kingdom of God. We're your number one and number two and number three, Jesus.

[13:23] We're your guys. They should be following us. But Jesus rebukes them. Verse 39, don't stop him. For no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able to soon speak evil of me afterwards.

For the one who's not against us is for us. In other words, Christians who are doing things independently of your church or your tribe of churches are still Jesus' children. And still we serve them and honour them and love them. It's not about them following us. We would describe ourselves here as an Anglican evangelical church. And Anglican evangelical churches are not the only kind of church and not the only kind of Christian. But it's easy as Christians to think they don't do things the way we do. They should be following us. But Jesus is saying, no, no, you're missing the point. It's not about being great. It's about being a servant in love.

I have come to die for all Christians. For all people who believe in me and trust in me. From every creed and every tribe and every nation. They're all my children. Serve and love all of them. [14:21] That's how he puts it in verse 41. For truly I say to you, whoever gives even a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. That's in the kingdom of heaven.

Do you see his point? No, I've come to serve. If you want to be great and rewarded in the kingdom of heaven, you must serve. It's funny, we call church services services, don't we? But many people think church services is where I go to get served. But church services are where we go to serve. I don't turn up to church because I get to hear a sermon for me. Or get to sing songs in the style that I like. Or I get my religious experience or my religious fix for me. I go to church to serve others. That is the point of the community. That's the point of being a Christian. I learnt this lesson very strongly. I remember when I was a student. I went on a camp in a summer, a Christian camp if you like. And they made the students do all the hard work.

[15:20] All the washing, all the dishes, washing the toilets. Just working hard all day. And I remember seeing in others who were doing this willingly and joyfully and not moaning about it.

That these people were great examples to me as Christians. See, until then I thought Christianity was about self-improvement. I thought it was about getting me saved. I thought it was about learning stuff for myself so that I could understand more of life and what's clever and wise. But it was until that summer that I realised that the mature Christian is the one who selflessly serves others. Not who selfishly serves themselves. So in this room right now, many of us are Christians. Who is the greatest in this room in the kingdom of God? When God looks down on this room right now, who is the greatest in this room?

Is it the vicar or the assistant minister? Is it the Bible study leaders or the person that runs the music or the bookstore? No. When God looks at this room right now, it's not rank of authority as we see it.

[16:31] In God's eyes, the greatest in his eternal kingdom will be the one who spends their life the most serving his children. So let me ask you, brothers and sisters, those of you who call yourselves Christians, are you great in the kingdom of God or in the kingdom of God but mediocre in the kingdom of God?

Is your life about serving others or serving yourself? That's Jesus' challenge to us. If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.

So that's how he's using children to help us understand. We want to be serving Jesus' children. But the second point, and it's also a very strong point, is this one.

Have a look down at your service sheets at the second point. Whoever causes Jesus' children to sin will be punished away from the kingdom of God. There's this idea of reward for service, but there's also this idea of punishment for those who do the opposite, actually, rather than serving, causing to sin.

Let me read verse 42. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it will be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and thrown into the sea.

[17:42] Now in this paragraph, we have one of Jesus' most plain speaking paragraphs in the whole of the Bible on hell. Now for those of you who are guests here today, this might well reinforce all those awful images you've got of church as the place where everything's about hellfire and damnation.

And I promise you it isn't. We don't often talk about hell, actually. We don't talk about it that often. But the reason we are today is because that's where we've got to in our readings in the Bible, on this point. But what we'll find is that Jesus is a plain speaker and not someone who masks difficult truths.

My landlord told us this week that he's selling our house, and so we're going to have to look for a new house. And so we've already started dealing with estate agents. And the thing that I've forgotten about estate agents, excuse me if you are one, but that you never get the truth, do you, from estate agents.

Spacious Victorian townhouse. And you go in there, this is not a spacious Victorian, this is, they never tell you about the damp, do they, or the, you know, the subsidence.

You never get on an estate agent's website, spacious three-bedroom Victorian house with damp and subsidence. You don't see that. All the photos are taken from brilliant angles, so you don't quite see all the walls, you don't quite get a picture of how big the room is.

[19 : 02] Jesus is not like that sort of estate agent that you can't trust. He's plain about the difficult truths, about hell. Now some people find talk of hell distasteful or wrong or immoral.

They say it's unfair or it's manipulation. But Jesus is telling us these things as a kind warning, and they really are a kind warning. Just a few months ago there was that terrible tsunami in Japan, wasn't there?

But in Japan they have the most, world's most advanced early warning systems for earthquakes and tsunamis. So actually they knew about the earthquake way out in the sea just a couple of minutes after it happened.

And they were able to warn huge swathes of people, you've got 10 to 15 minutes before a wave hits. Now we'll never know exactly how many, but many people were able to get themselves to higher ground, if you like, because of that early warning.

No one stood there when the warning went out, there's a tsunami coming, going, how dare you tell me there's a tsunami coming? Do you hate us? See they recognised this is something we've got to get away from.

[20 : 05] And they ran for their lives, many of them. And that's why Jesus tells us about the tsunami that's coming, that's much bigger, that's a global one, that affects all of us. Let's have a look at how he puts it.

He gives us two warnings actually. One to those who would cause Christians to fall away from Jesus, and those who are Christians, who themselves may fall away from the kingdom of God. So the first one I read a moment ago, was those who caused one of these little ones to believe in me, to sin, verse 42.

And you have this great mafia style illustration of how the concrete shoes, millstone tied around his neck and dropped in the Pacific. And what he's saying here is that that horrible way of dying is as nothing compared to what is deserved for those who take one of Jesus' little ones, one of his little children, and cause them to sin, cause them to give up trusting in him and being in the kingdom of God.

But I've got a little boy, and if anyone was the cause of him turning away from me and rejecting me, I'd be livid with them. There's a guy I know who recently, sadly, as a friend of a friend, actually I didn't know him that well, who took his own life, and he'd been very much involved in a cult.

And this cult had extracted him from his family and from his friends, and so he'd rejected them. And rightly, the family of this guy are absolutely livid with this cult because they were involved in pulling him away from them, and now he's dead.

[21 : 34] And it's like that. Jesus is saying, if you touch my little ones, if you cause them to reject me and to sin, I'm not going to be happy about that. I'm going to be really livid with it. Christians are, I think, quite easy to pick on, actually.

In some cultures, you know, in many cultures around the world, Christians get put in prison or face the death penalty for converting to Christianity, for example. In England, it's not quite as serious as that, but Christians do tend to get mocked and patronised and belittled.

But Jesus says, anyone who causes them to sin, anyone who causes them to fall away and reject me, will have dad to answer to, and you really don't want that, is what he's saying. But he goes on, and he says to us as Christians, if we notice anything that would cause us to begin to reject him and fall away, it could be serious for us.

He uses three very strong images. He talks about your hand causing you to sin, or your foot causing you to sin, or your eye causing you to sin. Let me read verse 43.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, for it's better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. He's using very strong language.

[22 : 52] It's as if you need to cut off your hand, or your foot, or your eye, whatever it is that might lead to you giving up, you being in the kingdom of God. Deal with it, get rid of it, however painful it is. Now, there have been some idiots in history that have taken this literally, and actually have castrated various parts of their body.

But that's not what Jesus is saying here. If there's something that you know of in your life, just get a perspective. Get rid of it, if that's going to cause you to turn away from the kingdom of God, from Jesus.

Now, Jesus does describe hell as a very serious place. In verse 43, he calls it the unquenchable fire. In verse 48, he talks about the worm that does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

That's a description of, it's taken from the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament, where Isaiah's describing the end of a battle, an ancient battle, where the greatest humiliation for the defeated army is where the soldiers are not given a proper burial, a soldier's burial.

They're just left for the worms to eat them, or they're set on fire. It's meant to be the ultimate in humiliation, and it's as if Jesus is saying, hell is never-ending humiliation.

[24 : 03] It's a place of permanent defeat, cast out of God's kingdom. It's a serious thing. Now, some people jokingly talk of hell as a place where I'll go with my mates, and we'll get up to all sorts of mischievous fun, but that's not what Jesus says.

That's a lie. Hell is a terrible, terrible place, which is why this is a really kind warning. The tsunami is a terrible thing coming. Run for your lives.

And Jesus says here, if there's anything that's stopping you from getting out of the kingdom of God, falling away from it, make sure you deal with it, however serious it is, however precious.

Gouge it out. Cut it off. Is there a sin in your life, brothers and sisters in Christ, which right now you can perceive, given enough time and enough energy and enough air time, will cause you to give up Jesus?

Is there a relationship, or a job, or a hidden habit, or a hidden desire in your heart, or a hidden aspiration, that might think, down the line might mean that I give up on God because that other thing becomes more important.

[25 : 10] Whatever it is, brothers and sisters, please, I want to urge you, and I'll say this to myself with great humility, I'm not standing over any of you in this, we want to be people who get rid of that because we heed the early warning system of Jesus.

And do you know what, if actually there's anything you want to chat about, if there's anything personal that you do think that might be a problem, come speak to me or Simon, we'd love to try and help you, and help you think through those things.

But as I finish, I want to make one point, this has been a very, very strong and serious talk, actually, that's the part of the Bible we've come to. But I imagine for many of you here who are guests, who don't come to church very often, you're probably wondering, well, how do I get into the kingdom of God?

Why would I want to get into the kingdom of God, perhaps? Well, I want to just leave you with one final illustration about children, where Jesus takes a child and helps us to identify with that child. It's actually on the next page. You just quickly turn over to page 1020, and you'll see a little heading there at verse 13 that says, let the little children come to me.

[26 : 13] Let me just read from verse 13. They were bringing children to him that he might touch them and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw the rebuking of these children, he was indignant and he said to them, no, 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 and laying his hands on them.

I want you to imagine fancifully for a moment that Jesus was doing a tour of South London and he was visiting Dulwich. And we've got Jesus for half an hour here at Grace Church Dulwich. I imagine the fly posters would be everywhere.

I imagine the place would be packed to the rafters. Even people who wouldn't be Christians would say, well, you know, if Jesus is here, we're half an hour, we're going to hear what the great man has to say. And we're all packed in here and then Jesus comes in and we say, oh, that's a great expectation.

But then all the children come out of Sunday school and they surround Jesus and they show him their finger paintings and their things made with plastic cups and bits of string and all these sorts of things they've been making all morning.

[27 : 21] And Jesus starts chatting to them and, oh, that's brilliant. What does that do? And we're all standing here as adults thinking, now, hang on, we came here to hear Jesus. Can someone get the kids out of here?

We want adult time here. And that's exactly what the disciples are doing here. But Jesus spots the opportunity to teach them and us a little lesson. He takes that child, imagine he goes and takes little Lucy Price and he holds her in his arms and he looks at all of us and holding her, he says this, Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like little Lucy here shall not enter it. What does that mean? What does it mean you have to be like little Lucy, like a child, to enter the kingdom of God? For many years I've been running courses at various churches and we do them here called Christianity Explored.

It's a seven-week course where you get to, sort of in an informal discussion way, you get to find out the basics of Christianity and I do commend it to you. If you'd like to do a course like that, let me know and I can find out for you.

It's a really good course. But I find on these courses some people become Christians but other people decide not to become Christians by the end of it, which is fine. But it seems to me, in my experience, the hurdle that people who reject Jesus cannot get over is this very one that Jesus is talking about.

[28 : 44] They cannot get over the fact that they think of themselves as adults and Jesus says, no, you need to think of yourself like little Lucy Price, like a little child. No one wants to be called a little child.

Even children don't like to be called a little child. When my wife says to me, Mark, you're acting like a child, she doesn't mean I'm being fun-loving and cute. It's a patronising phrase.

Being like a child implies you're helpless, you're needy, you're lowly, you're dependent, actually. And that's exactly what you must be to enter the kingdom of God.

Lowly, needy, dependent. Anyone who comes before God on the last great day when we all have to face him with their CV of all the things they've achieved in their life, their job, their family, their good religious deeds, the problem is God knows our hearts and he's seen it all.

Just as Lizzie said earlier about her mum and we'll form an orderly queue afterwards to find out about what that was all about. But God has seen everything that we've ever thought, said and done in all our days and there's no one seriously that's going to stand before him and say, hey, I deserve to be here.

[30 : 02] Literally no one, if we're honest. None of us can be adults, can be self-satisfied, self-congratulatory. We need to be like children because the only way to get into the kingdom of God is by being forgiven for the wrong things that we've done.

And being forgiven requires a lot of humility. It says to God, I'm wrong, you're right, please forgive me. And that's a grovelling, humble, difficult thing to do.

And that is why you have to be like a child to enter the kingdom of God and not like a successful, self-satisfied, self-righteous adult. Jesus stands here today, as if it were, holding little Lucy Price and as he holds her, he looks at all of us, each individually, and he says to us, truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like this little girl shall not enter it.

And if you want to enter it, and believe me, you do, you need to accept God's forgiveness and be humble like little Lucy is right now. Let me pray as we finish.

Lord Jesus, we want to admire you and lift you up for you are the one who did not come to earth to be great, for others to think you're amazing. You actually came on earth to die for all of us that we might be saved.

[31 : 35] And so we therefore think you're amazing. You are the greatest in God's kingdom. For you gave yourself to serve others more than anyone. Please give us the courage of our convictions and to follow your example, Lord Jesus, to be the biggest servers, not to be the greatest names, but to be the ones who lovingly give ourselves, pour ourselves out for the sake of our brothers and sisters.

And Lord Jesus, we pray for those of us who are still not Christians, who are thinking these things through and just here for the visit and find these things perhaps old or new. Please we pray, would

you help us to go home and understand what it means to be like little Lucy Price, to be a child. Father God, all of us here who are Christians know none of us are good or holy or deserve anything from you. But we ask for your forgiveness in humility like a child. And we pray for all of us who haven't yet done that.

Please help us to understand what that involves. Give us the courage to be able to do that, we pray. Amen.