

Luke 18:15-17
Jesus Loves the Little Children

There are few things in life that equate with being a parent. The joys we feel and the heartbreak we suffer are unlike any other relationship. Few things can make us smile like our child's successes, and few things can sadden us like their disappointments. An ancient Jewish proverb says "a parent is only as happy as their saddest child." That is so true.

I am confident that any parent can remember the birth of their child. The fear. The questions. The possibilities. The responsibilities. We know that as parents, we are commanded to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). We know that no matter the education they receive, the person they marry, or the career they pursue, all will depend upon their knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We know that our deepest joy is not that they are successful in their vocation, or become financially well off, but that they walk closely with their Lord. Truly it is written, "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth" (3 John 4).

While we all know and appreciate the need to evangelize our own children, and Scripture has much to say on the subject, it is possible to wonder what the Bible has to say about those children too young to understand and commit to the truths of Scripture. What does God think of them? As our text today teaches, we can be thankful that "Jesus loves the little children."

The Setting

Jesus had been talking about the kingdom of God. He had been encouraging His disciples to not lose heart as they waited and prayed for it to come. He had lectured the Pharisees on the kind of people that would be accepted into that kingdom. Jesus summed up His teaching on that subject with the statement, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). Now, Luke states simply that "they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He would touch them" (v. 15).

We do not know who the 'they' were. There is no assignment of time or place. Perhaps this event took place in a house in either Perea or Judea where Jesus was staying as He made His way to Jerusalem. It may have been a continuation of the same conversation we have been discussing, or Luke may be relating this narrative here because it fits topically. In either case, the Pharisees, who boasted of their self-righteousness based on ancestry, the meticulous keeping of the routines and rituals of Judaism, and their scrupulous moral behavior, believed they had merited inclusion in the kingdom of God. Jesus insisted that only those who realized that they were unworthy were welcome in that kingdom. Jesus taught that only those who understood they had nothing to recommend themselves would enter the kingdom of God. And who better to represent such a one as those, than a newborn infant.

Humans are amazing creatures. We clearly are at the top of the food chain, and yet, ironically, we are extremely vulnerable for several years after birth. While other species can walk or fly, and generally become relatively independent in a few months or even weeks, humans must be under the care of a parent for years in order to be able to survive. We are the very picture of vulnerability. A newborn infant is the perfect illustration of God's grace to those incapable of meriting His favor.

Both Matthew (19:13-15) and Mark (10:13-16) recount the same event. That this event was recorded in each of the synoptics is one indication of God's special love for children. That God loves the very young is a theme found elsewhere in Scripture,

“²⁰Moreover, you took your sons and daughters whom you had borne to Me and sacrificed them to idols to be devoured. Were your harlotries so small a matter? ²¹You slaughtered My children and offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through the fire” (Ezekiel 16:20-21).

And Jesus, Himself, had held little children in high esteem before,

“⁴⁶An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest. ⁴⁷But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side, ⁴⁸and said to them, ‘whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great’” (Luke 9:46-48).

But that did not mean Jesus was ignorant of the rebellion of children,

“³¹To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like? ³²They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another, and they say, ‘we played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’ ³³For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘he has a demon!’” (Luke 7:31-33).

But why did the parents want Jesus to touch their children? Perhaps to protect them from disease and evil spirits. Such superstitions permeate religions based on hierarchy and ritual. And, it was not uncommon in the time of Jesus for parents to bring their children to be blessed in this way by a rabbi. It was hoped that the spiritual blessings possessed by the rabbi because of his favor with God would be imputed to the child through the rabbi's blessings.

The Rebuke

Unfortunately, as important as bringing their children to Jesus was to the parents, it was nothing but an interruption to the disciples, for “when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them” (15). The disciples seemed to have determined among themselves that they had the right to manage the Savior's schedule. Forgetting that children are never a waste of Christ's time. The disciples were truly unkind. This was not a new development; they had been unfeeling before,

“²¹Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, ‘have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.’ ²³But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, ‘send her away, because she keeps shouting at us’” (Matthew 15:21-23).

“⁴⁹John answered and said, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow along with us.’ ⁵⁰But Jesus said to him, ‘do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you’” (Luke 9:49-50).

The word Luke used for ‘rebuke’ is harsh. It means ‘punishment’ and indicated that the disciples did not gently encourage the parents that the time of the Messiah might be better spent that with newborn children. Their rebuke was direct, personal, and without mitigation. They frowned, scolded, and shouted for the parents to leave Jesus alone.

The disciples were apparently still under the influence of the religious leaders of their day that argued that salvation must be earned. And what child could possibly earn salvation. An infant could not keep the Law. A child could not offer sacrifices or participate in the rituals. It was a truth universally acknowledged that they were beyond God's reach at that age. So convinced were the disciples of these beliefs, that they did not take a message or try to find another time for the parents to return. There was no purpose to the matter. There was no need to waste Jesus' time by surrounding Him with those who could not benefit from Him. Their concern may have been well-intentioned but it was selfish. It was not their place to govern the Messiah. It was not their place to determine the priorities of His ministry.

The Response

Jesus would have none of that. Hearing the disciples, "Jesus called for them, saying, 'permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these'" (16). The command was given both in the positive "permit the children" and the negative "do not hinder them." Jesus wanted no misunderstanding. The parents and their infants were very welcome.

But what do we make of the statement of Jesus that "the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (16). The statement suggests no limitations or prerequisites. It implies no reservations or exceptions. Jesus did not say that this promise belonged only to Jewish children either by birth or conversion. Yet, surely Jesus is not declaring the salvation of every child in His midst.

It is important to understand that the word for 'children' refers to those too young to be held personally accountable for possessing saving faith. There is no Scriptural support for this being a particular age, but rather this "age of accountability" varies from child to child. Jesus was stating that until that time in a child's life when they are accountable for their own faith, God had them under His special care.

But it is important to also see what Jesus was not saying. He was not saying that children are sinless. That was a truth everyone understood,

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5).

"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

Jesus was simply teaching that though no child was sinless, an infant or young toddler was not held personally accountable for violating the laws of God. To them belonged the kingdom of God. This included both its blessings now and in the hereafter. The great body of Scripture supports this idea.

When all of Israel except Caleb and Joshua were denied entrance to the Promised Land because of their rebellion, still God promised that, "moreover, your little ones who you said would become a prey, and your sons, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall enter there, and I will give it to them and they shall possess it" (Deuteronomy 1:39).

When God relented and spared Nineveh, Jonah was indignant. Explaining Himself, He said, “should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?” (Jonah 4:11).

Though Scripture declares that while all are born with a sin nature, there is a sense in which mankind is also condemned because they have not responded to general revelation, “¹⁹because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1:19-20). The very young cannot respond to general revelation, as they have no sense of the general works of God.

The poignant narrative of David’s grief over his dying son demonstrates the truth that God cares for infants. “²¹Then his servants said to him, ‘what is this thing that you have done? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but when the child died, you arose and ate food.’ ²²He said, ‘while the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, “who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live.” ²³But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me”” (2 Samuel 12:21-23).

Finally, Scripture clearly declares that all races and peoples will be represented in Heaven. “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). How can this be if the gospel has not spread everywhere and some tribes are extinct? It can only refer to the unborn and infant dead.

Jesus’s words offered assurance that those children who are miscarried, aborted, or died very young are with Him in heaven. It, too, is a profound argument for the sovereignty of God in salvation. If one chooses to believe that it is up to us to choose Jesus (Arminianism) then one must conclude that every child aborted, stillborn, or died as an infant or toddler, is damned.

The Lesson

Jesus then concluded with the declaration, that “truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all” (17). The line “truly I say to you” indicated that Jesus was speaking as one with authority. He was speaking as God.

But again, we must understand what Jesus was not saying as well as what He was saying. The phrase “like a child” can refer to a child’s simplicity and dependence. It can also refer to the sheer numbers of those in heaven (throughout human history, perhaps one-half of all humans born have died at birth or in infancy). Jesus did not mean that receiving the kingdom of God like a child meant indifference to things of this world or freedom from evil.

It is possible to fall into many errors when thinking of children in spiritual matters. We can think that children who die without being baptized are damned. Equally disastrous, we can think that children cannot receive grace until they are adults. Finally, we can argue that children are naturally innocent (a belief held only by those who have not been parents).

Clearly, Scripture disabuses us of each of these notions. We know that all people are born with a sin nature. We know that all people sin of their own accord. We know that all people must receive grace to be saved. We know that baptism is an act in expression of faith, important as it is, but nothing more.

Jesus stated the principle in the negative for better understanding. If you do not receive the kingdom of God like a child then you will not enter it. The principle, then, hinged on how children receive things. They do so without work on their part. Think of feeding a baby. Think of a two-year-old at Christmas. To receive the kingdom of God like a child is to receive the kingdom of God like the gift it is.

“¹²But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

“⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

In relating to children we must remember that Christianity is not like blue eyes or curly hair. It is not hereditary. We must make certain our children have the opportunity to hear the gospel. We must also realize that the gospel must be presented in a way that is understandable, but does not oversimplify the truth of Scripture or omit truths. Furthermore, while our children need to be immersed in church life, the best way we can present the gospel is by modeling it ourselves. We can learn that even infants can receive blessings from God. Therefore, we should pray for them ceaselessly. And finally, we should be careful to accept too early a profession of faith. It can make a young person complacent and give them a false sense of security. It can make a young person arrogant and feeling more self-righteous than their peers. It can encourage a young person to profess faith for the wrong reasons (peer pressure, attention, please parents, etc.)

Takeaways

Let us praise God that He loves the little children and graciously provides for them both now and in eternity.