

# Kids and the Kingdom

Matthew 19:13-15

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It is hard to look at old movies and see how people treated children. Don't our hearts burn with anger when we see innocent children abandoned or hurt? Jesus' actions and words come to mind:

*He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven."* (Matthew 18:2-3, 5-6, 10, NIV)

I'm grateful that Christ's words have penetrated Western society and raised the value of children, at least in our words; yet, I think children are vulnerable because of our unbelief and practices.

When Satan tempted Adam and Eve as recorded in Genesis 3, he exaggerated God's prohibition asking them if God had forbidden eating fruit from all of the trees of the garden. With those words alone, Satan sewed doubt about God's motives. When Satan dismissed or diminished the consequence of taking the fruit, he challenged the motives and character of God and God's word. Since Adam and Eve acted in defiance, we, their children ignore or defy God's words; and we either dismiss or diminish the consequences of sinful actions. Adam and Eve didn't realize the stumbling block they became to all they loved. They didn't realize how their sinful actions brought death to themselves, their children and the world they ruled. We don't either. Our children are blessed greatly by our faith, but they suffer terribly from our sins.

One of the greatest things that hurt our children is marital pain. I'm so grateful for the marriage and family ministries at Bethany. Randy and Diane Erickson have done great work in this area. On May 7th, we will have a special guest share a short video during worship and speak in the Adult Sunday School hour on Family Life. We want to do everything we can to help you who are married, you who are remarried and you who are single to embrace God's love and power in your relationships. There are some difficult challenges. The prominence of sinful attitudes and actions in our culture create a hostile environment for healthy marriages, healthy families and healthy individuals. I came across a new marriage and divorce study. Understand that these studies describe what is happening and not what must happen. If you are hurting right now, recognize that God is giving you information that can be used for healing. If you ignore it, you may become one of the statistics. If you don't, you can be a shining example of God's love and grace. It is estimated that one-third of divorces result from high intensity conflict marriages. These relationships suffer from life-dominating addictions, life-threatening abuse or devastating actions that violate the marriage covenant and the children's understanding of it. Children in these situations do better after a divorce than while their parents are married. However, two-thirds of America's divorces result from low-intensity conflicts. In these cases the children do much better if the parents remain married.

Let me give you one example. The marital success rate, defined as staying together, of first marriages in the United States, is 57 percent. The marital success rate for those entering marriage after a divorce is 40 percent. Guess what the marital success rate is for the first marriage of children of divorce. You might think that the children might be somewhat affected. Perhaps, their marriages fail a little bit faster than the general public. However, the truth is that their first marriages fail at exactly the same rate as their parents' remarriages, 60 percent.

Apparently, they aren't just affected by their parents' pain. They actually carry the same pain and struggle with it like their parents. The Bible teaches that there is a spiritual cleansing in Jesus that makes us new. I observe that work every day. There is great hope. No person has to end up a statistic. That is why we are going to talk about kids and the kingdom.

Have you noticed how spiritually sensitive little children are? Although they have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy; they sense things. I've watched little ones pull away or warm to people and display good judgment in it. Often, a little one will experience nightmares over things that adults later discover are evil. I know children have over-active imaginations. I remember a scary closet. Nevertheless, children can sense things that adults tune out. If you work with children, you know exactly what I am saying.

Children aren't the only ones that sense things we adults tune out. As a young child I mounted a horse and took its reins. The horse was known to be docile. However, the horse, sensing my insecurity, decided that it was in control and that it was lunch time. Despite my jerk on the reins, it raced to the barn... and I hung on. Many animals sense what is going on. They spook, growl or lick us to death. Something spiritual is happening with them. Some of you may remember the Bible's account of a non-Jewish prophet named Balaam whose donkey sensed the presence of a destroying angel. Balaam, known for spiritual sensitivity, was oblivious (Numbers 22:21-34). We may think we are sensitive, but we may be oblivious.

When Jesus stopped his disciples from shooing children away, he was doing something that we need to learn from. He wasn't just telling us that children are valuable. He was showing us that blessings aren't merely cognitive. They are not just encouraging words. The little ones, whom he put his hands on and blessed, probably understood little. Thus the disciples discounted

the importance of Jesus' work with the children. We must confess that the work of Jesus' blessing with these little ones was mostly hidden.

That is often true of things like communion and baptism. Great power can be released in these acts, but most often we are oblivious. Peter Horribin, who was with us in January, writes of how he went to give water to someone he was praying with and how that person reacted when he was led to bless that water. Ordinarily, we wouldn't put much stock in something like that; yet he saw immediate results on this one occasion. When I first investigated divine healing, I read the works of a missionary doctor from the Church of England. As he led people through confession and offered them communion, he saw many physical healings. Most of the time when we give communion, we observe nothing. Yet does that mean that nothing is happening? One of my former parishioners had suffered much in childhood and when she was immersed in baptism, she experienced a deep inner healing that shocked her. We can't explain the physics or psychology of such a thing... especially with children. Yet, Jesus prayed blessings for people who could not possibly understand what he said; and he declared:

***Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*** (Matthew 19:14, NIV)

Jesus tells us right there and shows us repeatedly that the power of the Spirit is not limited to the arena of thoughts. God's kingdom is a matter more of the heart than of the head. Although the head can affect the heart, the heart will dominate the head. A corrupt heart leads to corrupt thinking. A pure heart will find its way to sound thoughts. Indeed, Jesus said:

***I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*** (Matthew 18:3-4, NIV)

Jesus is not telling you and me to check our brains at the door. Yet, if we think that we must understand something to obey, then we elevate ourselves to equality with God. We call

children who do that with adults rebellious. We must realize that what we think we know often gets in the way of learning what we need to know. Like a little child we must come to Jesus to learn, unlearn and learn again.

I see two important applications for us today.

First, *ministry to children is vital*. Children's ministry is one of the greatest callings in life. You don't have to be a great teacher to change a life forever. You can change lives by rocking infants in our nursery and speaking blessings on them. You can bless toys and food. You can care lovingly for children who will never know you and still affect their hearts forever. If all you can do is select one child and pray at home for him daily, you will affect his life. Those of you who can volunteer to serve in some way, making food, or writing notes, tending nursery or helping with children's worship, don't underestimate the power of God's Spirit working in your faith. Children don't need to understand our words or actions to have their hearts warmed and their lives blessed. I hope each of you will consider how you can bless children and youth.

Second, *receiving ministry as children is essential*. Learn to trust Jesus like little ones learn to trust and obey their parents. If you wait until you understand why, you'll suffer needless pain. If you obey immediately, you'll eventually learn why... and be glad you obeyed. Come to Jesus and be teachable. Realize that he is working with you right now.

Can you remember how some adults warmed your heart and helped you know Jesus? Can you remember how some showed you God's love? Will you thank God for them? As a disciple will you ask Jesus to teach you how you can, right now in this stage of life, bless children like Jesus? Will you ask God forgiveness for your unbelief and ask him to teach you like a child the love and power of God?