

"Listen to Jesus on Reaching Children"

Matthew 18:1-14; 19:13-15

Throughout this year we have 'Listened to Jesus'. I felt led of God to choose this theme when I noticed that during the earthly ministry of Jesus, God broke into our world and spoke audibly to crowds gathered around Jesus. At His baptism, at His transfiguration and a few days before He died in John 12 when Jesus asked God to glorify Himself. At His baptism and His transfiguration God said the same thing, 'This is My Son whom I love, with Him I am well-pleased.' But at His transfiguration God added 'Listen to Him.'

This was a reference to what God told Moses in Deut. 18:14 about the Messiah.

¹⁴ The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so. ¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.

God said we must listen to Jesus because as Peter pointed out on behalf of the 12 to Jesus who asked if they were going to leave Him to as some of the crowd had, 'Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.' (John 6:68).

So, if we want to hear eternally life changing words, words that can change us and give us hope and strength we must listen to Jesus. That should also involve helping others hear the life changing words of Jesus, even children. When we think about sharing the gospel, do we think about reaching children? As an example; if you're praying for God to give you an opportunity to share your faith today do you envision that gospel opportunity being with a child? Most likely an adult comes to mind. As we collect and bless and send off our shoebox gifts to needy children around the world, which becomes an opportunity for them and their parents to hear the gospel, let's listen to what Jesus said about children's ministry.

In Matt. 18:1 the disciples ask Jesus 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' Remember when you were in school and you were always told there's no such thing as a stupid question, but we can probably all remember when we asked a stupid question that we wished we hadn't? Well this is one of those 'Why did I say what I just said!'

In the Sermon on the Mount know Jesus emphasized humility of spirit, mourning over one's sins, being meek and being willing to suffer for Jesus' Name as qualities that describe one who is part of the kingdom of heaven. But we all forget things Jesus said. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this incident all in the same context. Just prior to this Jesus has just asked the 12, 'Who do you say I am?' Peter proclaimed Jesus was the Messiah, which I'm sure he spoke for all the 12. Shortly after this Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain where they alone get a glimpse of Jesus in His glory. The disciples being human no doubt thinking some might be more important than the others, ask Jesus (Matthew probably being polite since Mark and Luke said they argued) about who was the greatest in the kingdom?

Jesus doesn't react nor does He answer the question directly but instead calls a child to come to Him and says,

"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Before we explore this passage let's go to Ch. 19:13. The reason why I mention this first is because the events in Ch. 19 obviously happen within a short time after the events in Ch. 18. If Jesus uses children as an example of who's great in the kingdom of heaven the disciples didn't get it. Because shortly after this event we read in 19:13,

¹³ Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

The same disciples who were just told by Jesus you have to have childlike qualities to enter the kingdom of heaven! Well if Jesus desires childlike qualities, He obviously desires children to come to Him because He wants us to understand ...

Children Need Jesus Also **(19:13-15)**

People were bringing their children to Jesus in order for Him to bless them by laying hands on them and praying for them. This was not uncommon to ask Rabbis but probably parents were more eager to bring their children to Jesus because they believed who He was or that they sensed He loved everybody and they wanted His fellowship. The only way these children could get to see Jesus was if

Someone brought them to Jesus (v.13a)

While we don't know for sure if the parents believed Jesus was the Messiah, at the very least they knew that Jesus could impact their children for good. As parents we appreciate the people (teachers, coaches, Sunday school/junior church teachers, youth leaders, relatives, friends) who impact our children for good but especially for Christ. When we have child dedications we emphasize that this child needs the input of the church family, and we even agree to help them in their faith process. Very rarely do people come to Christ without someone bringing them. Everyone here I'm sure was led to Christ by a number of people sharing the gospel with them.

By asking for the children to come Jesus implies their need for Him. No matter how old a child is they all understand they do things that are wrong and are disobedient. This is the basic element of the gospel; that all have sinned and are separated from God. Only Jesus can make us right with God.

But not all children grow up in a home where the gospel is heard so we need to have ministries that encourage people to bring children to hear the gospel. We need to encourage our children and grandchildren to be witnesses themselves to their peers. As grandparents you need to be involved in your grandkids lives obviously and especially if Jesus is not a priority to mom or dad. As we'll see when we get back to Ch. 18 children are more receptive to the gospel than adults.

Unlike the disciples, Jesus was not bothered by children coming to Him. What bothered Jesus was that people were preventing children from coming to Jesus. So, we must ...

Make sure we're not hindering them (v.13b-14a)

... from coming to Jesus and hearing the gospel. The word hinder means to 'stop, prevent'. In Matt. 18 Jesus will speak more of this and use the phrase stumbling block. How might we hinder children from coming to Jesus? We might think they're not old enough so we delay sharing the gospel. We don't want to be guilty of forcing the gospel on them and they'll find out when they're ready, but the danger of that is some are never told. Our own poor lifestyle choices and possible hypocrisy hinders children from coming to Jesus because they don't see what difference He makes in our life. The classic hypocrisy is sending your kids to church but not going your self.

The disciples wrongly thought Jesus didn't want the children to come to Him or that He was too important or too busy. If Jesus wants children to come to Him then we must do all we can to point children to Jesus and let God in His sovereign plan for all of us to sort it out. It's never too soon for kids to know who Jesus is. What they understand about Jesus will change as they get older so we tell them what they are able to handle at the time.

The reason Jesus gives why we shouldn't hinder children from hearing about Jesus is because

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Children illustrate how to be saved (vv.14b-15)

¹⁴ Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." ¹⁵ When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to 'such as these'. People who are like children. People who come to Jesus as a child would. Jesus doesn't elaborate here on this because He just spoke about it in Ch. 18. Let's return there. The disciples were discussing and now ask Jesus who's the greatest in the kingdom and Jesus takes a small child and says,

"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

So here Jesus uses a child to illustrate how to be saved. We must come to Jesus as children.

We Need to Trust Jesus as a Child Trusts **(18:1-5)**

The big issue here is that the disciples arguing about which one of them was greater than the other, and by rebuking parents for bringing their children they probably believed children were unimportant because what they could do to help advance Jesus' cause to set up His kingdom! Ah, Jesus says to Himself, you guys still don't understand My kingdom. Jesus' Kingdom is not entered into nor does one advance like you do in the world: through achievement and power. Jesus says trust me like a child trusts his parents,

By not trying to impress Jesus (vv.1-3)

These children had no agenda when they came to Jesus. They weren't there to replace the 12 as Jesus disciples or to earn their way into sitting at His right and left hand; they were only there to enjoy Him. Which tells us a lot about Jesus. He was likeable, caring, safe and a joy to be with. Why else would children want to be around Jesus? The parents brought them and the parents knew Jesus

was safe. The only benefit the children got from being with Jesus was joy. They were simply enjoying Jesus not trying to earn His favour or impress Him with their knowledge or accomplishments.

To be like a child, Jesus says is to be less concerned about status. The disciples are hung up on Jesus establishing His kingdom over the Romans. What do children have to do with that? They're slowing down our agenda. Jesus, however, uses the children as an illustration of what true kingdom citizens are like:

“unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The word “change” or “turn” means to go in the opposite direction. Jesus is not impressed by our qualifications. He is impressed by our admission of our sinfulness and willingness to believe in who He is by faith.

The disciples have forgotten Jesus' teaching on how the kingdom works. It's not about how great you are but how humble you're willing to be. It's not about status but about servanthood. Children are less concerned about status and ...

Humbly trust Jesus and believe who He is (vv.4-5)

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom. What do the children do? They are simply content to be in His presence. The disciples aren't content with just being in Jesus' presence, they want Jesus to do something for them. They want positions in the political kingdom when He overthrows Rome and the Pharisees. They want something from Jesus when all Jesus wants from us is humble trust.

Disciples of Jesus need to have child-like contentment enjoying the peace of a relationship with Jesus. They trust Jesus to love and protect them. Children aren't afraid when they know their parents protect them and provide for them. Similarly, Jesus' disciples should show they are content in Jesus because they trust Him to provide and care for them in His time and in His way.

To follow Jesus like a child also implies a willingness to serve. In Mark's account Jesus also said,

9:35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

The disciples were concerned about being perceived as great in Jesus' kingdom and Jesus said greatness is measured by willingness to humbly serve. In Mark 10 Jesus would say that the Gentiles love to lord it over others, but not so with you. *“Instead whoever wants to be- come great must be your servant.”*

Jesus said this in the context of teaching about childlike humility. Young children are often very willing to serve and help others. They don't think about tasks being underneath them. They are often too hard for them but that doesn't keep them from trying. The disciples needed a lesson in humility and Jesus rebuked them for keeping the children away. Jesus' language probably surprised the disciples. He went on to say:

⁵ And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. ⁶ “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.

Jesus is using children as an illustration for disciples. "Children like these" refers to not to actual children but to those who humble themselves like a child who have come into the kingdom; other disciples. Jesus is saying to follow him like a child means to accept all Jesus' followers. The disciples did not see the value of the children because they were thinking of externals; size, number or resources. Jesus says don't judge my children by what you think they have to offer, accept them simply as fellow believers and see how together you are stronger and can accomplish more. They didn't understand this right away because before the chapter is over Peter is wondering how often should I forgive my brother and then shortly after they ask Jesus 'What's in this kingdom business for us since we have left homes and family and children?'

When we think of Jesus getting upset, we don't think of this passage. He pronounces woes of judgment on those who hinder children "these little ones" from coming to Himself.

To Ignore Children is an Offense to God **(18:6-14)**

⁶ "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. ⁷ Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! ⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. ¹⁰ "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. ¹² "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. ¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

The millstone tied around the neck was not just an illustration. The Romans were known to do this on occasion to criminals and rebels. This is how upset Jesus is if we hinder people – especially children—from coming to Jesus. He brings back some of the language He used in the Sermon on the Mount about dealing radically with anger and lust so that it doesn't lead to murder or adultery.

By using strong language Jesus warns us,

Don't be a reason why they (children) reject Jesus (vv.7-10)

Be careful we're not a stumbling block from anyone coming to faith in Jesus. Our lifestyle, our words, our lack of words are all ways we hinder people/children from coming to faith in Jesus. When our faith is real and growing and genuine people see that. They want to know why we have joy, contentment and peace in life. But if we sound and act like non-believers we can be a stumbling block for the gospel.

The word for 'despise' is look down upon. Jesus tells a parable of the lost sheep. All 100 are valued equally. Jesus says,

Value everyone as God does (vv.11-14)

... including children. Just as every sheep that belongs to a shepherd is valued; valued enough that leaving 99 behind to find one lost one is worth it. When Jesus says '*God is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost*' is not a guarantee that every child or person will be saved. It is His heart's desire that every might come to know Him because He loves everyone equally and sent Jesus to die for everyone.

God has a heart for everyone including children. We, like the disciples, can sometimes make the mistake that making disciples is for adults or teens and adults. Jesus says start them as early as possible. When status and self-importance are concepts they don't understand yet. When simple trust and belief comes readily to them if they've been raised in a loving and trusting environment. When their memories are sharp, when we can establish truths in their life early on that are stamped in their minds even if later on they become a lost sheep. And we pray that God may bring to their minds the things they learned early on in life and bring them to repentance.

So, what are we doing to make disciples of our own children, of our church children and the children in our community and world? There are many ways we can get involved globally as we're doing this morning with shoeboxes. Operation Christmas Child is committed to sharing the gospel with the children (and their parents) and those who desire can be enrolled in a discipleship program where they meet weekly or monthly to learn more about Jesus. There are also many sponsorship programs out there like Compassion, World Vision, GFA who meet practical needs of children, share the gospel with them and link them to a local church.

Locally we have ministries like Camp IAWAH, youth groups, kids' clubs, VBS, Sunday School and Junior Church. Are your children involved in some of these where they hear the gospel? If moms and dads aren't doing it grandparents, can you offer to take them? God has blessed us with many young children here and a few more on the way. Everybody likes seeing them here, but let's not just look at them being but get involved in their walk with Jesus. We're constantly asking for help with nursery or junior church or Sunday School. When we dedicate our children, we ask if you would be part of the process as the extended family to help them grow in Jesus. We all say yes then but if we really mean it we would help in some manner.

This morning you have a new prayer bookmark in your bulletin. I include the children's names as well. May I encourage you to pray for our children and youth by name, using the verses on the back to guide you if you're not sure how to pray for them. I make it my goal to pray for at least two family units a day. If you're not sure where to start in helping our children follow Jesus can you start there?

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