

Introduction

Today is Life-Chain. Out on Hwy 100 many will stand with signs in an attempt to remind folks all around us that the reality of abortion is a modern day atrocity that needs to stop. In 2017 the abortion rate was down from previous years. Nevertheless, 862,320 babies were intentionally aborted in the United States. And the beat goes on. No economy stoppage, no daily statistical updates on the local and national news, no mass outcry, no mass protests for the taking of innocent life, and by and large no remorse. Almost a million babies killed in one year, before any even has the chance to take a single breath bears witness to a selfish nation that largely considers children an intrusion. What a contrast when we look back to Jesus. In this morning's text, we see quite a different disposition in his heart.

[Read Text and Pray]

The big idea in this text, the overall message that stands out this morning, is this: Jesus welcomes kids, and we should too. Children are precious in the sight of Jesus, and they should be in the sight of his disciples too.

As we unpack the text, we first observe . . .

I. The Blessing Sought by Loving Parents

Matthew lets us know in verse 13 that as Jesus had entered this region, people were bringing their children to him to lay his hands on them and pray. The word for children here is a Greek word that specifies younger children from infancy up maybe to the age of a toddler.

It stands out to me here in Matthew and in Mark that this account of folks bringing their children to Jesus follows Jesus's discussion of marriage. One of the main purposes for marriage is the raising of godly children. Last week as we considered the covenantal foundation and nature of marriage, I mentioned to you Malachi, the Old Testament prophet. He reprimanded the Israelites for being faithless to their wives and violating the marital covenant and doing violence to one another by divorce. In that context, he made this statement: "Did [the Lord] not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring."

Children are a fundamental part of God's design for making male and female and joining them together in marriage. When God blessed the newly married couple, he commissioned them to be fruitful and multiply. David speaks with profound amazement of how the Lord knit him together in his mother's womb and how he is fearfully and wonderfully made. Childless couples in the Bible look longingly for the birth of children. Psalm 127:3-5 says, "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate."

Proverbs 17:6 says that "Grandchildren are the crown of the aged." Now I do not really like to think of myself as aged, but you well-know that my grandson Titus is a source of great joy. Last weekend we brought him down for an over-nighter. And on the way down on Friday night, Titus started calling to me from the back seat. He would cry out "Granddad!" and I would reply, "Titus!" and then he would say, "Hey!" And start again. The next day in Walmart, he was doing the same thing to the top of his lungs.

Children and grandchildren are a huge blessing. It is insinuated right here in the text in that Jesus' instruction about marriage is followed by the arrival of parents who are seeking the blessing of Jesus upon their children. The God who instituted marriage should be sought for the blessing the children with which he blesses a marriage.

The Jewish rabbis taught parents to bring their children to respected teachers to receive blessing and prayer. And it seems just natural for God-fearing parents to want divine blessing upon their children. These parents had heard about Jesus, how he was healing the sick and lame and how large crowds were following him. They also no doubt heard about his teaching, and perhaps heard him themselves. The efforts of the Pharisees to discredit Christ were to no avail. Numbers of parents were bringing their children to Jesus.

And in that they are an example to be followed. If you love your children, you will want to bring them to Jesus. Obviously Jesus is not present in the flesh, but he is present wherever you are. He is as close as crying out to him in prayer and seeking his blessing. And as surely as these parents were seeking to introduce their children to Jesus, so should we. Paul instructs parents to "bring up [children] in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Teach them about God and tell them about the Lord Jesus. As best you can, you should bring your children to Jesus. You may not be able to change your child's heart spiritually; that is the work of the Holy Spirit, but God is honored by parents who lovingly instruct their children as to who Jesus is and who cry out to him for blessing upon their children.

There is one other aspect of this verse that I notice. I am sure that in general it was parents who brought their children to Jesus. But the text does not specify parents. It speaks of PEOPLE who were bringing the children. There are opportunities when parents can't or parents won't that God provides others who step in to bring children to Jesus. I think of Christ-followers such as George Muller who established orphanages to care for children and bring them to Jesus. In places where the adults are very hard-hearted to the gospel, God has saved children from that people group through operations of ministry to orphans. A children's home, for example, was established by Paul Pillai in northern India in the midst of a Hindu and Muslim stronghold. But many children have come to Christ because of the care taken to love them and introduce them to Jesus.

Children, if there is someone in your life who is seeking to introduce you to Jesus, I want you to take note. They are giving of their hearts to you in a wonderful way. They love you very much. And they want what is best for you and that is to know Jesus and be blessed by him.

We move from the blessing sought by loving parents to . . .

II. The Mistaken Notion of Well-Meaning Disciples

Here come the children being brought by the people. But the disciples of Jesus were resistant. In fact they showed a little attitude. They actually rebuked the people for bringing children to Jesus. It seems to me that to rebuke the people was to attempt to reason with them that they should have known better than to have bothered such an important man as Jesus with the heavy schedule he has by bringing children to him. He is healing lots of sick people. He is teaching some really important stuff. And he really does not have time for children. I believe the disciples meant well, but here is yet another area in which they needed to be instructed. Somehow they had missed the heart of Jesus for children. If we do not watch it, we could do the same thing. We could get all caught up in the "real important grownup stuff" and overlook the importance of children.

But the really sad thing about what the disciples were doing is that here were people coming to try to get to Jesus, but the disciples were actually turning them away because they did not think they were important enough. Who were they to judge? But who are we to judge? Have you ever looked at someone and thought, "Well they will never be interested in Jesus." Then you have looked at someone else and thought "they might be." We are not the ones who should decide who should or should not be brought to the Lord. He saves people of all types, sizes, colors, ages, and backgrounds. God forbid that we should ever turn anyone away from Jesus. This simply is not the way it is with Jesus. If a person desires to come to Jesus, he simply will not turn them away.

In John 6 Jesus is teaching how human beings cannot and will not come to him to be saved without the Father's effectual work in them. Such talk results sometimes in persons fearing that if they come to Christ, they may not actually be received. Or individuals depict in their minds an image of Jesus standing on a platform kicking off certain of the hands of those who are reaching for him. This is a mistaken notion. The truth is expressed by Christ unequivocally, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day." Later he emphasized, "Whoever believes has eternal life."

I am not trying to make the case that a toddler can understand and believe the gospel. I am rather wanting us not to make a mistake like the disciples and turn seekers away. I want us to be able to delight in the fact that Jesus does not turn away those who genuinely seek him. Now it is true that some appear to seek him who do so with sinister motives or hypocrisy. But that is not for us to judge. Jesus knows the hearts of people.

The disciples were well-meaning but mistaken. We turn from them to . . .

III. The Warm-Hearted Reception of a Welcoming Savior

Jesus overruled the rebuke of the disciples. He insisted that the children be allowed to come to him. They should not be hindered. Mark tells us that Jesus was indignant when he saw what the disciples were doing. It was irritating to him. His attitude expresses his disdain for the fact that the disciples felt they had the prerogative to determine who could and could not approach him, and especially for young children. Why? These are the most dependent members of society. God clearly has a heart for the most vulnerable. They should not be overlooked. They should not be shut out. The Bible as a whole directs attention to the least. The king and those in authority who do good are always looking out for the least, the ones who can be taken for granted or used for selfish purposes. Jesus has his arms open for such as these. He warmly welcomes them to himself.

Parents should love their children. Grandparents should love their grandchildren. The disciples of Jesus, who make up churches, should love children in general. And the most loving thing we can do for a child is to bring that child to Jesus.

Jesus was very busy. Not everything he did centered on children. Think of all that Jesus taught and did in terms of ministry. Most of it was adult-oriented, but he guarded jealously the opportunity to extend kindness and love and blessing to the youngest of children as well. A church should not overlook such opportunities either. Not everything we do is going to revolve around children, but we should be vigilant to maintain attention to them. We should delight in the sounds of the presence of children. We should smile to see the energy being worked out in their young lives. We should purpose to make sure they know they are a welcome and celebrated part of involvement in this family of faith. And we need to be sure that we as a body are doing our part not to hinder them but to bring them to Jesus.

Kids growing up in our society have so much against them. There are so many lies, so many people who are trying to recruit kids for their political and social agendas. Strong voices desire to mold and shape young minds into a worldview in which God and his standards of morality are despised. Covetousness is the reigning ideal. The problem of sin is scorned and the need for Jesus is rejected.

Here come these little children and they are vulnerable and trusting by their nature. Who is going to point them to Christ? Who will teach them truth? What will be the outcome if we do not? As with Jesus so must it be with us. They must not be overlooked. As our congregation grows older, our energy levels decline. Working with children requires a significant amount of effort and patience that presents challenges, but we must be intentional in focusing efforts at ministering to and welcoming children. We must see them not as a hindrance but as an opportunity and a responsibility.

How thankful I am for those in this fellowship who give themselves to serve in children's ministry! We as a body need to be supportive and appreciative of them. And we need to all be asking what are ways in which we can see to it that children are not overlooked or sent away from the real important stuff that goes on in this place. No they are part of it and must not be hindered.

Parents are the first line of responsibility in raising children well and pointing them to Christ. But some children live in homes where it is not going to happen, and the church must not turn a blind eye to those situations. Children's ministry is not the one or the central ministry of the church, but attention to kids must not be ignored either.

Next we see . . .

IV. The Instructional Example of Little Children

One of the reasons why children are so warmly loved by Jesus is because of what they represent. He says in verse 14, "for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." Those who populate the kingdom of heaven share a likeness with young children. We have seen this point previously in Matthew in chapter 18 when the disciples asked Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus called to himself a child (the Greek word is the same as here in chapter 19). And he said if you do not become like this child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Now think most specifically of children from infancy to toddlerhood. Toddlerhood is that stage when the sinfulness of a child's heart begins to be more boldly manifest. They start saying "no" and resisting the direction they receive and desiring to be the rulers of their domain. Jesus knows that children are sinners from conception, but he is certainly not thinking of a child's terrible twos. He has in mind the authenticity, humility, trust, and complete dependency which is exhibited by young children.

Young children are authentic. In other words, they are not hypocrites. What you see is what is. They do not pretend to be something they are not. They are humble. Being needy is just a part of who they are. They are dependent for their nourishment, their protection, and direction. They implicitly trust others to take them where they need to be. It is even intimated here as people were bringing them to Jesus.

Such are those who belong to the kingdom of heaven. These are qualities Jesus highlighted in the sermon on the mount. Blessed are the poor in spirit and the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and the pure in heart—authenticity, needy, trusting, and dependent. Those who enter the kingdom are needy. They are sinners and unworthy of the kingdom. They need a righteousness they do not have. They can't dress themselves. They can't change their soiled

garments. They are helpless to bring themselves into the kingdom. But they hear the gospel and believe. They come without pretense. They just know they need Christ and they hunger for the righteousness only he can provide. Jesus was placed on a cross. He died and rose again to provide what every sinner needs—forgiveness, redemption, cleansing.

A soiled and uncomfortable baby will cry out just needing to be cleaned and changed. A hungry baby yearning to be filled will cry out without ceasing until his pangs are quenched. Even so in God's gracious dealing, sinners are awakened to the discomfort of their guilt and the pain of their shame and their need for cleansing. They are aroused to feel a hunger for righteousness. And if they will but cry out in a sincere faith to Jesus—the only one who can help—he will save them; he will change their soiled garments for a robe of righteousness. He will satisfy their hunger with the righteousness he accomplished. He will redeem them. If they trust him implicitly and take him at his word, they will be saved. They will enter the kingdom. And they will be born children of God.

Becoming like a little child is how we enter the kingdom, but it is also who we are in the kingdom. We are children. We are needy and dependent. We are helpless in ourselves. Do not ignore children. Do not look on them disdainfully. Do not look upon them as interruptions to the really important stuff. Because when we look upon children, if we are in the kingdom, we are looking at ourselves. We remain dependent and needy. But we are children under the care of the consummate father. He knows our needs. He provides for us. Be careful he who thinks he stands.

I was thinking back on a little onesie that was popular back when Melissa and I were raising our little ones. It said, "I may be little, but to God I am big stuff!" That statement was both true and not true. True, children are important to God. But also NOT TRUE when it comes to children of God! No matter how old I am and no matter how much I have matured in the faith, I am not big stuff. I am still just a child. And I need to not think more highly of myself than I am. I am just a child, but I am a child of God. Through the ups and downs, the struggles and the victories, the follower of Christ is the adopted brother of Jesus and the adopted son of God. When you see a child, you see yourself. So despise them not. Show them the kindness of your savior. Welcome them as the Lord himself has welcomed you.

This text closes by directing us to . . .

V. The Compassionate Blessing of a Merciful King

Verse 15 says, "And he laid his hands on them and went away." Jesus is more than talk. What he says reflects who he is. Especially in this political climate we hear so much talk, so many loud and bold promises and assurances. And so little action. But that is not the case only in politics. We really get quite used to folks giving assurances and just not being faithful to their word. That's one reason why this little statement here in verse 15 is significant. No one has ever made any bolder claims and promises than Jesus. But when Jesus says something, he means it. He keeps his word. Everything he does is in line with what he says. He had said, "let the little children come to me," and when they came, he took the time to take them unto himself and lay his hands on them in a manner of blessing them and praying for them." Here is a merciful king you can absolutely trust. He did not come to lie, cheat, steal, or simply gain a following. He came to save and his people he will save.

Just think of a few of the bold assurances Jesus made:

- Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
- Destroy this temple (his body) and in three days I will raise it up
- I am with you always.

–I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come again and will take you to myself that where I am you will be also

Jesus keeps his word. His claims are an announcement of what he surely will do. This is the Jesus every Christian has the blessing of belonging to and this is the Jesus to whom we have the pleasure of bringing little children and those who will come as such to him.

Conclusion

I started out this morning talking about the national atrocity of abortion in America. We rightly shudder at the number of children whose parents are literally ripping the life out of them. But here is another thing to think about. What thought and what prayer and what action are we taking to bring to Jesus even some of the children in our sphere of influence.

I realize that there are many opportunities and many problems and many missional works to be done. Let us be sure that one of those that gets our attention is the work of ministering to the little ones, welcoming the little ones just like Jesus did, caring about their eternal life as we do their physical life.