

# The Kingdom? Kids' Stuff!

Following Jesus to the Cross: Part 11

Mark 10:13-16 (Mt.19:13-15, Lk.18:15-17) 2/1/2020

Like any exclusive club, the kingdom of God has entrance requirements that exclude most people. This message shows how you can know if you are in or out, and what the implications are for your daily life.

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**Mark 10:13 People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." 16 And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.**

## Introduction: Exclusive Club

If you want to join the Liberty National Golf Club, the initiation fee is a half million dollars. Why? Because it's an exclusive club. They want to exclude people like me. To get into Mensa you have to be in the top 2% on IQ tests. Why? Same reason—to keep people like me out. The Denver Nuggets is a basketball club that discriminates against low-jumping, non-athletes like me. The thing that makes prestigious clubs prestigious is the fact that they are so discriminating in who they allow in. Groucho Marx: "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member."

Exclusive clubs have stringent entrance requirements, but those requirements are not just for entrance. They define the club. The Nuggets have high athletic requirements because they want the team

to be good at basketball. However good you are when you join, you have to stay at least that good from then on, otherwise you're out.

Today's passage is about the entrance requirements for the most prestigious club there is—the kingdom of God. It is also an exclusive club, from which most people in the world are rejected because they can't get past the entrance requirements. It's crucial that we understand those requirements so, 1) we will know for sure if we are in or out, and 2) so when we do get in, we'll understand what defines the club so that we'll know what we're supposed to be every day from the day we join until the day we die.

In this passage, Jesus speaks about receiving the kingdom and entering the kingdom. If you want to enter it, you first have to receive it. What's the difference between receiving and entering, what are the entrance requirements, and what does God expect from us on a daily basis once we're in? Let's take a look.

## Baby Blessings

Just to remind you where we are—we're in the beginning of Mark 10 where Jesus is going toe to toe with the Pharisees again. The topic is divorce, and Jesus is teaching some revolutionary things. Then Jesus says something that makes the Pharisees look like someone just punched them in the gut. They're speechless. You're dying to know what Jesus said, but you missed it because the people behind you have a crying baby. Every time Jesus says something, all the people react, but you keep missing it. You turn around just in time to see John escorting those people out.

Now you're so relieved that noise gone, you look back at Jesus, but now he stopped talking. You see his jaw tighten and his face is red. It scares you. He's ... angry.

### **14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant.**

That Greek word refers to an anger that you can see.

Jesus drops the debate, turns toward the door, and walks out the door like he means business. Just before he gets to the doorway he grabs Peter and James by their tunics and jerks them outside with him.

Once they are outside, you can hear Jesus is having words with the 12. You can't make out all of it. At one point you do hear Jesus raise his voice: "How long have you been doing this? How many have you sent away? Peter, did you know about this?"

So you step outside and ask someone, "What happened? What's he so upset about?"

### **13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.**

## Intercession

People wanted Jesus to bless their kids—to put his hands on them and pray for God to bless their lives. They wanted Jesus to pray for their babies. (I say "babies" because Jesus holds them in his arms. And Luke uses the word "infants" in his account<sup>1</sup>). It was common for people to want spiritual leaders to pray for their kids because God listens to the prayers of godly men. And Jesus clearly had a special relationship with the Father.

It was customary to do this on your child's first birthday. Was that a good thing, or just a superstition? Did it actually make a difference in those kids' lives? When that little kid grew up, would his situation be different because of that day Jesus prayed for him? Of course! If it didn't make any difference, Jesus wouldn't have gotten mad about the ones who got turned away.

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<sup>1</sup> Lk.18:15.

This is our first introduction to the intercessory ministry of Christ. He prays for these kids. Later on he'll pray for Peter, that his faith won't be destroyed when Satan sifts him as wheat. And after the ascension, Jesus has an ongoing ministry of intercession for us.

**Romans 8:34 ... Christ Jesus ... is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.**

The Father is eager to bless us, but only as a favor to his Son.

### ***Bring Your Kids to Jesus***

So what these people were doing was a wonderful thing. The best thing you can ever do for your kids is exactly what these people were doing—bring them to Jesus. Parents go way out of their way to make sure their kids get an education, get into a position to make good money, become mature socially so they will have good relationships, find a good spouse, develop physically, etc. And very often their souls come in last—an afterthought. But nothing is more important.

### ***Don't Hinder Them***

So bring kids to Jesus, and at the very least, don't hinder them from coming to Jesus. And there are a lot of ways you can hinder a child.

**Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children.**

If we provoke anger in them by treating them harshly or unfairly, that can result in them rejecting both us and our God. Living out a bad example before them can train them to compromise. Failure to teach them God's Word can make them shallow soil. Living a materialistic lifestyle can teach them to love money and become weedy soil. Let the little children come to him and do not hinder them.

### ***Jesus Blesses the Children***

Don't hinder them—instead, try to get them to verse 16.

**16 And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.**

Jesus sets aside what he was doing and does this. And he didn't just quickly run down the line like a bunch of sneezes: "Bless you, bless you, bless you ..." No, he took each little baby in his arms, held it, and prayed for that child. This is God, in a human body, showing us the heart of God in Isaiah 40.

**Isaiah 40:11 He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.**

If the disciples want to prevent Jesus from holding his little lambs close to his heart—it's like Peter trying to prevent Jesus from dying on the cross. You might as well ask God to stop being God—it's not going to happen.

## **Jesus Loves the Little Children**

The old Sunday school song has it right—Jesus loves the little children. And this beautiful act here not only made a difference in those kids' lives, but in the lives of millions of children since then. This fallen world is not a child-friendly place. You've heard of how children were treated in ancient Rome. Unwanted children were routinely just thrown away—especially girls. They would just drop them out in the woods or along the road somewhere and let them die of exposure or get eaten by wild animals or birds or dehydrate, or whatever. They would just cry until they were dead.

And that wasn't just ancient Rome. That practice was common in India all the way up to modern times. In that culture, raising a girl didn't make economic sense. They wouldn't continue your name, they

wouldn't stay in your family, there was the dowery. There was a saying, "Raising a daughter is like watering someone else's garden." So they would just throw them out.

We don't relate to that because children are valued in our culture, but that's only because of the Christian influence. The greater the Christian influence in a culture, the better children and women are treated. George Whitfield's ministry in America got started when he heard about all the orphans, and so he raised a bunch of money and came over and started orphanages, some of which are still in existence today. Then he influenced John Wesley to do something for children in England. They were working the little kids so hard in the factories and mines and mills that 75 percent of kids didn't make it to age ten. They were expendable, renewable commodities. So Wesley preached against those abuses. After WWII, it was Christians in America who went to Europe to care for all the children who became orphans in the war. It's the influence of Christianity that gives value to children.

That's why children aren't routinely thrown out in the street to die in our country. But you can feel that's the direction our culture wants to go. They keep pushing abortions to later and later stages. Now prominent politicians are arguing for letting the baby be born, make it comfortable, then talk to the mother about whether or not to kill it. They are just pushing it older and older—more and more in the direction of ancient Rome or India. Imagine if Christians weren't around to resist that.

I heard of one woman in India who devoted her life to rescuing the abandoned babies along the roads. She would raise them and try to give them an education. They called her Granny Brand. I heard about a dinner they had to honor the Brand family that was attended by some of the people she had rescued and raised. And she got to hear some of their stories. Granny Brand did that in the name of Christ, and what a beautiful picture of the heart of Christ that was.

If you're not really an animal lover, that's okay. If you're not crazy about the mountains or the beach, that's fine. But if you're not a lover of children—that's a problem, because Jesus loves the little children.

Okay, so back to our story.

### **13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.**

You look at Jesus and he's shaking his head. He says, "Didn't we just go over this not too long ago?" And the reader of Mark is saying, "Yeah, it was just a few paragraphs ago."

## **Putting Principles into Practice**

Remember when the disciples wanted to know who was the greatest, and there was that awkward moment when Jesus took a little kid and stood him there among the 12? And then he said this:

**Mark 9:37 Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.**

Your attitude toward little children and toward lowly people in general is your attitude toward me and toward the Father.

When Jesus taught a principle to the disciples, it usually wasn't long before he gave them a chance to put it into practice. Very often we think we learn something from Scripture, but when the time comes to actually live it out, that principle is the farthest thing from our mind. We have the abstract theoretical idea, but we haven't made the bridge between theory and practical application. And so shortly after giving the principle, Jesus gives the disciples an opportunity to put it into practice. For example, right before the Transfiguration, Jesus taught them the principle: **If anyone would follow me, he must deny himself.** And the disciples are all saying, "Okay, copy that. We need to deny ourselves." Then just a few verses later they are in an argument about who was the greatest. And so Jesus has to circle back and say, "Remember that deny yourself principle?" "Yeah." "Well, what you're doing right now—that's the opposite of self-denial." "Oooooo. Okay. Now we get it."

In this passage that's happening again. You're reading Mark, you go through that whole section about welcoming little children in Jesus' name, then three paragraphs later you read this.

### **13 People were bringing little children to Jesus**

And you think, "Oh, here we go. Here's an opportunity to put what they just learned into practice. How will they do?"

### **13 ... the disciples rebuked them.**

Oops. I guess that lesson didn't quite sink in. And, as usual, we see an unflattering image of ourselves in the mirror of the disciples. Isn't this what we do? We hear a sermon, we think we've learned something, but then when it comes time to actually do it, we just do the same thing we've always done and that amazing new insight is the farthest thing from our minds. Beware of thinking you have something down just because you have it down in your mind. You don't have it until you do it.

### ***Wrong Attitudes***

So instead of welcoming the children in Jesus' name, the disciples are boxing them out and rebuking the people who brought these babies. The way the grammar shakes out, it kind of sounds like the ones bringing the kids were other kids—maybe older siblings.<sup>2</sup> We can't say that with certainty. It's also possible it was their parents. But whoever brought them got rebuked.

### ***See Themselves as More Important than Kids***

Mark doesn't say why, but it's not hard to guess. What these people are asking for is Jesus' time, and that's a problem. Jesus has put people off before because of time and priorities. Remember the Syrophenician woman who wanted Jesus to heal her daughter and he said, "It wouldn't be right for me to neglect the disciples at this time"? Jesus is the most famous person in Israel. He's incredibly busy—up before dawn, teaching, preaching, prayer, ministering to the crowds, performing miracles, and training his disciples. If he's not the busiest man in Israel, he's definitely the most important. And the disciples figure it just isn't practical for him to be working the nursery.

As usual, the commentators are outraged at the disciples here. But is it really that outrageous? How many pastors have you seen working the nursery on Sunday mornings? It's a practical matter. Jesus is just like your pastor—he only has so many hours in his day, and every hour spent holding babies is an hour he has to take away from some other really important things.

So we can understand this—especially if it was older kids bringing younger kids. The most famous man in the country debating a group of Pharisees on the topic of divorce. And the whole thing is interrupted by some kids?

It's not unusual for adults, in a situation like this, to automatically say no to kids just because they are kids. "No, don't do that, don't touch that ..." But in this context, even adults who liked kids would probably say no. "You can't come in here. The grownups are talking. You're interrupting. This isn't a time for kids."

So this is understandable. But what does it say about us that it's so understandable? The disciples feel like they need to solve the problem of these babies being brought. This demand on Jesus' time was a problem. But why don't they see it as a problem when Jesus gives attention to them? If Jesus is such a busy man, why is it okay for the disciples to take up his time?

There's only one possible answer: they're more important than the kids. It makes sense for *us* to take up Jesus' time but not for a bunch of little kids, because we're more important. Most of us wouldn't say it in those words or even admit to ourselves that's our attitude, but it's really everyone's attitude. It's the

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase "Do not hinder them" in v.14 clearly refers to the children.

natural reaction of self-centeredness. People who live in Colorado complain about other people moving here because they are making it too crowded. Why is it okay for you to move here and take up space but not them? Why is it okay for your car to be on the road, but all those other cars are just causing congestion and backups? Why is it okay for you to be in the store, but all these other people are making it a madhouse? The attitude that I'm more important than everyone else is hard wired into our fallen nature.

But it really comes out when we're around people we regard as lowly and unimportant. We want babies taken out of the room, or we want children to stop playing because it's annoying to us? Who are we? Why is our peace and quiet more important than their play? Obviously there are settings where kids need to be taught to sit quiet. But we need to be careful that we don't fall into the practice of just forcing them to conform to what's comfortable to us just because we're more important than they are, because we're not. We're just like the disciples. They heard Jesus' teaching back in ch.9, it went into their ears, but it hadn't made its way into their value system yet.

## Barrier or Bridge

And so instead of being a bridge between people and Jesus, they were a barrier. When Jesus says, **do not hinder them** in verse 14—that's the second time Jesus has used that exact phrase. Again, just a few paragraphs ago they were trying to shut down a guy's ministry because he wasn't authorized and Jesus says the same thing: **do not hinder him** (9:39). They keep hindering things Jesus wants to happen, and they do it because of an inflated concept of their own greatness. If they thought they were lowly, unimportant people, they wouldn't have turned these lowly, unimportant children away.

The disciples really need to go back through ch.9 again verse by verse—deny yourself, take up your cross, if you want to be first you must be the very last, the greatest among you is the least and the servant of all. That's basically what's happening here in ch.10—Jesus is taking them back through ch.9. They flunked that class and now they are repeating it.

Okay, so hopefully we've got it now—honor children. But Jesus isn't done. He's got a much bigger principle he wants to teach now.

# Receiving the Kingdom

## The Kingdom Belongs to Them

Most people read this passage and walk away thinking, "The disciples shouldn't have turned those kids away—why? Because Jesus loves children." That's true, but it's not the reason Jesus gives here. Back in ch.9 when Jesus told them to welcome the children, the reason he gave was if you welcome children in Jesus' name, you welcome Jesus himself. But that's not the reason he gives here either. What reason does Jesus give us here?

**14 ... He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.**

Jesus has a way of ratcheting up the stakes, doesn't he? A minute ago it was, "Be nice to kids," now we're talking about the kingdom of God!

### *Who are the "Such as These"?*

Jesus says **the kingdom of God belongs to such as these**. Who is that? Is he saying, "Not just these children, but *such as these*, meaning all children"? Or does "**such as these**" mean the kingdom belongs to adults who enter it in a childlike way? I've always taken it the second way because that's what Jesus goes on to say in the next verse.

## **15 ... anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.**

So it's definitely true that children are an illustration of how adults must enter the kingdom, and we'll talk about that in a minute. But I don't think we can dismiss the idea that the kingdom belongs to literal children as well, because in v.14, that's the reason Jesus gives for why those literal children should be allowed to come to him. If children don't really have the kingdom—they are just illustrations of lowliness, why would that mean we should give literal children any particular treatment?<sup>3</sup> Jesus said, "Don't hinder these actual, literal babies from coming to me." Why? Because the kingdom of God belongs to such as them. I'm convinced Jesus is saying, "Let literal babies come because they're in the kingdom."

Scripture speaks of people in hell as people who have intentionally sinned and who will have regrets for their evil decisions they made. But it also speaks of children as not being able to understand the difference between good and evil. So the descriptions of people who go to hell don't seem to fit.

Some have argued that "such as these" doesn't refer to all children, but only children who are brought to Jesus for him to bless them. So your babies are only in the kingdom if you ask Jesus to bless them. That doesn't seem as likely to me, but it is possible. And either way, it would make good sense to ask Jesus to bless your children because if this passage shows us anything, it shows us that it's a good thing if Jesus blesses your child.

## **Receiving and Entering**

And we see again that there are two stages of the kingdom. Jesus spoke of the kingdom as being attainable here and now in this life. But he also spoke of entering the kingdom as the opposite of going to hell when you die. You either go to hell or you enter the kingdom.

So there are two stages of the kingdom, and we see them both in this verse.

**15 I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child [now] will never enter it [in the future]."**

## **How to Receive Like a Baby**

So how does one receive the kingdom like a baby? How do you become a Christian?

### ***Receive***

The word **receive** should be translated **welcome**. That's how it's translated every other time it's used in Mark, including in the last passage where Jesus talked about children and the kingdom of God (in ch.9). There Jesus said if you welcome a little child in his name, you welcome Jesus and you welcome the Father.<sup>4</sup> Now he's saying in order to enter the kingdom of God in the next life, you have to welcome the kingdom, and you have to do that like a baby. Welcome the kingdom like a baby welcomes its parents. What kind of attitude does a baby have in welcoming its parents?

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<sup>3</sup> John Piper argues that the reason children exist in this world is to give us an illustration of helplessness and dependence, and fact that they serve as an illustration of that means we should give them special honor. It's possible that's what it means, but I don't think it's very likely. The Bible says God is a rock. Rocks illustrate what God is like, but we don't show special honor to rocks because of that.

<sup>4</sup> The only other time the word is used in Mark is in 6:11 where Jesus talked about people welcoming the disciples into their homes.

## ***Like a Baby***

Let's go back to the first thing Jesus said in this book about how to enter the kingdom. Here's the summary of everything Jesus preached:

**Mark 1:15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel!"**

That's how you receive the kingdom of God—through believing. Trust. Go to the other place where Jesus used children as an illustration of adults who are in the kingdom. What did Jesus point to? Mark 9:42 if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to turn away What is it about children that makes them a good illustration of how to receive the kingdom? Trust. Babies trust their parents completely. They rely on their parents for everything. When you're an adult, you go where you want. When you're a baby, you go where mom goes.

God gave babies something we call *separation anxiety*. Separation anxiety is easy to define: it's when nothing is worse than being separated from mom—nothing. They can be playing with their favorite toy in their favorite place eating their favorite food—favorite everything; and if mom leaves the room, none of that matters a hill of beans. They want to go with mom. That's how much they trust their parents alone to take care of them. They will give up anything to stay close to mom because she's the only one they trust to be their caretaker.

So receiving the kingdom like a baby means trusting God like a baby trusts mom and dad—trusting him so much that he is your only security, and you have severe separation anxiety if you are distanced from him. It means trusting Jesus so much, you'll believe everything he says and you'll follow him anywhere.

And what gets in the way of that kind of trust in God? Trust in self. Pride. Greatness in your own eyes. When you have greatness in this world, you trust in all your vast resources. When you are a big zero in this world, you can only rely on God. And so that's the other way we must be like babies—lowly, unimportant, servants, bottom of this world's greatness scale. Receiving the kingdom like a baby means to be so lowly that your only option is to trust 100% in the Lord Jesus Christ.

## ***The Helplessness of Babies***

And it's so important that we understand that, that God flooded this world with children—something like a quarter of the population. In some countries it's half. There are billions of children, because it takes so long for humans to mature to adulthood. Have you ever wondered why it takes so long for a human baby to become independent? Animals have babies and minutes later they are walking. It takes a human baby 5 months just to get to where he can turn over. And mom and dad get all excited: "He rolled over! It only took a half a year." At 15 months old, cows are having babies. God could have made humans like animals. Or he could have made us like Adam and Eve—you just show up in the world full grown. Instead, God made it so it takes well over a decade to grow up. God designed humanity that way so that we would be constantly surrounded by billions of flashing neon signs showing us how we have to be to enter the kingdom of God.

## ***Exclusively Low***

That's the entrance requirement for the most exclusive club in the world: the kingdom of God. And most people are shut out—not because they can't meet the requirements, but because they won't. It's not because the bar is too high for them, but because it's too low and they refuse to stoop that low. In ch.2



Jesus said, “I only came for sinners, and the sick. So the righteous and the healthy—their out. Jesus has nothing to offer them.”<sup>5</sup>

And remember, the purpose of entrance requirements for a club is to define that club. Here’s where this gets really practical for us. If this is the entrance requirement, then this defines the club. You want to boil the whole Christian life down to its core, that’s it—clinging to God like an infant clings to its parents. Do you want to become a better Christian? Become more like a baby.

### ***Lifting Your Arms to God***

I told you that Granny Brand was a beautiful model of Christianity. But you know what’s an even clearer picture of Christianity? If you really want a picture of what it means to be a Christian, instead of looking at Granny Brand, look at those babies she rescued. It’s those little unwanted infants, dying along the side of the road and reaching up to the rescuing arms of their caretaker. That’s what it means to be a Christian. That is the only way to enter the kingdom of God.

## **Conclusion**

This is yet another example of Jesus taking this upside-down world and setting it right—reversing high and low. The disciples thought they were greater than the babies. Jesus said, “No, they’re in the kingdom; whether you guys are in the kingdom is still an open question. And based on your attitude toward children, it’s not looking great. But there’s hope for you Apostles if you just sit at the feet of those babies and learn something.”

Two main takeaways from this passage: first, make sure your attitude toward children is like Jesus’ attitude. Remind yourself that the kingdom of God belongs to such as them.

And second, learn from them. When you find yourself getting annoyed at them for being loud or rambunctious or immature in some other way, remind yourself that there is a reason God didn’t design that child to be walking an hour after he was born and having babies at 15 months. That child is the way he is to teach us the most important thing anyone could ever learn—how to receive the kingdom of God. Instead of just trying to get the kid to be less annoying, or leaving the room or whatever, look at the child and learn something new about how to welcome the kingdom of God.

## **Summary**

The disciples didn’t get the point from Jesus’ teaching about welcoming children in his name (learning something in theory doesn’t automatically find its way into practice). They should have let the kids come to Jesus because the kingdom belongs to those kids (infants are all in the kingdom, and so they should be treated well). Jesus is our intercessor, and his intercession matters.

Not only should we show them kindness, but we must learn from them how we must welcome the kingdom (by faith—the trust of a child in his parents to the point of separation anxiety).

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<sup>5</sup> Mk.2:17.