

The Childlikeness of the Believer Mark 10:16-18

Introduction

As we return to our text, we are still discussing what discipleship is. Jesus, as Master, defines discipleship and lays out the cost: “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (8:24). His disciples begin to quarrel about greatness (9:34). It is possible (and desirable) to be a great disciple. Great disciples seek service not glory (9:35). Great disciples receive children (v. 36-37) and others who follow Jesus, even if they are different (38-41). Great disciples put their love for Jesus Christ before every other love. They have such a fierce loyalty to the Lord Jesus, that they deal harshly with their own sin, and particularly their own temptations (42-48). *All* disciples are tested with fire (v. 49). *Great* disciples are tested, and by God’s grace maintain their testimony and have a preserving effect in the world (v. 50).

Discipleship is most often undertaken by married folks. Christ’s claims extend *everywhere*, to *everything*, and this includes marriage. Those who follow Christ must reject the frivolous covenant breaking so common then (and now) (10:1-12). God intended marriage for life.

The next quality of an excellent disciple is not stated explicitly, but is *shown*. Negatively. Disciples are soft-hearted and teachable. But these disciples were not. Despite having the closest access to Jesus, they still did not get it. They did not absorb his teachings. The Lord Jesus Christ had just taught to receive little children (9:36-37). Not long afterwards, little children (babies through toddler age) are being brought to Him, and the disciples not only fail to *receive* them, but keep *rebuking* those who bringing them (10:13). Jesus is too important to be bothered with trifles. Jesus becomes indignant with the disciples, reviews the central points, leaving us with a small passage with a huge lesson: Disciples are not only to *welcome* children, they are to *emulate* them.

Of such is the kingdom

Jesus begins with *review*. If we want to follow Christ, we must embrace His view of children. In doing so, we must keep a weather-eye out for the sin of sentimentalism. When a culture’s attitude towards children is based on a thing as flighty as sentiment, then you have forty years of legalized murder, and women celebrating their abortions as things that liberate them from “18 years of inconvenience.” This is also tied to the thoughtless and unrestrained use of birth control. The pagan track record towards children is deplorable: child sacrifice, abandoning infants, abortion. The stark facts are that *as a culture*, we cannot say we love children. The facts demonstrate we hate them.

The commands of Jesus to receive little children are grounded in who they are. All children are image bearers (Gen. 1:26-28; 9:6). All children are immortal, and thus all children are eternally significant—wondrously or disasterously significant. This honor is not inherent—it is bestowed by their Creator. Our only claim to glory is that we reflect *His*. But there is an added dignity to the children of believers. God’s covenant embraces not only believers, but their children also (Gen. 17:7, 12; Ps. 103:17; 105:6–10; Isa. 59:21; Acts 2:38, 39; 16:15, 33; I Cor. 1:16; 7:14; Col. 2:11, 12). Baptism of our children acknowledges what God says about them. They are not little pagans until they reach some magic age. They are little Christians.

To them belongs the marks of sonship: acknowledgment (baptism), sustenance (Word & Sacrament), and discipline (parental and ecclesiastical).

Childishness v. childlikeness

Not only must we *welcome* children, we must emulate them (Mk. 10:15). Adults are famous for demanding adult-like expressions of faith from kids, when Jesus says *mature* expressions of faith are *childlike*. Here we must beware of absolutizing this verse. Not everything about children is commended. God calls us not to *childishness*, but *childlikeness*.

Childishness: Grow up

Abandon childish behavior: Scripture is filled with exhortations to us to “grow up”. Children tend to unbridled squabbling. Envy and strife come naturally—it is their inheritance from Adam. When we divide into camps; when we envy; when we quarrel, we are acting like children (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

Abandon childish thinking. Later in this epistle, Paul speaks of putting away childish speech, understanding, and thoughts (13:11). There is nothing commendable here about this kind of immaturity, and these childish things must be put away. For the Corinthians, they had exalted the gift of tongues above other gifts, when the law teaches tongues are a sign of judgment to unbelievers (14:20-22). In Ephesians, childishness is shown when we are easily suckered by false teaching. It is childish not to know the Word. It is childish to be indifferent to doctrine. And the doctrines that we are told are “elementary” and “milk not meat” are doctrines like repentance and faith, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection, eternal judgment (Heb. 6:1-3). Because these believers were “unskilled in the word of righteousness,” they did not have their senses trained by practice to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:12-14). Elders are experienced, godly, wise men who are skilled in the word of righteousness.

Abandon a childish self-perception: A classic error of children is to think themselves more mature than they are. Paul admonishes this in Philippians (3:12-15).

Childlikeness

There are many ways children need to be like adults. But returning to Mark we see that in the matter of entering the kingdom, adults must be like children. Entering the kingdom is synonymous with being saved (Mt. 19:24-25). If we are to be saved, it is only if we become like children. But this, too, is a gift of God (Mt. 18:3, passive voice; John 3:3, 5). So what quality of childlikeness must we emulate? Humility and simple faith (Mt. 18:4; cf. Ps. 131:1-2). In the gospel, God puts just enough “foolishness” in to offend the wise and proud (1 Cor. 1:27-29)—that no flesh should glory in his presence. So simple, uncomplicated trust in God. The context of a parallel passage in Luke 18 gives us both positive and negative examples. The Pharisee and the Rich Young Ruler failed to enter the kingdom as children, and so they did not enter at all. The tax gatherer humbled himself, and went home justified. Justification bears fruit in life. We are to be as babes in regard to evil (1 Cor. 14:20). We are to be babes in our hunger for the Word (1 Pet. 2:2), but not in our understanding of it (see above).