

Entering the Kingdom as Children July 18, 2016 by Kent Hughes

Jesus asserted the matter of being like a child in his response to his disciples' protest: "But Jesus called them to him, saying, 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God'" (v. 16). He did not say that the kingdom belongs to the children he was holding, but to "such [as these]"—those who are like the little ones.

What is the quality of being of children, and especially those characterized as "infants" in the opening line of this passage? What is the ontological distinctive of a newborn? Helplessness! Jesus has in mind here the objective state that every child who has ever lived (regardless of race, culture, or background) has experienced—namely, *helpless dependence*. A newborn, naked, with flailing hands and feet lifted toward the sky, is a hear-wrenching profile of helplessness. And unlike any other creature, its helplessness extends for years. No child would survive its early years without the help of others.

Every child born into the world is absolutely, completely, totally, actually helpless. And so it is with every child who is born into the kingdom of God. Children of the kingdom enter it helpless. If Billy Graham enters the kingdom, it will not be because he has personally preached to more people than any man in history. It will not be because he has remained impeccable in his finances when so many have failed. It will not be because he has been a faithful husband. It will not be because, despite his fame, he has remained a humble, self-effacing, kind man. When Billy Graham enters the kingdom, it will be because he came to Christ as a helpless child. It will be because of God's undeserved kindness toward Billy's helplessness.

If you would enter the kingdom, this is the only way you can come.

Jesus' teaching reached its climax in an authoritative declaration that moved from the requirement of *being* like a child to *receiving* as a child: "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (v. 17). What are the elements of such childlike receiving?

First, unmitigated trust. We see such trust in a baby who stands on his father's hand high over his dad's head—and smiles proudly. This may sometimes be misplaced trust, but it is nevertheless complete and sincere. Children trust others for everything—their food, their lodging, the arms of others who bear them about. Regarding trust in God, the child's ability to believe has never been wounded by wicked suggestion or burdened with superstition or persevered by falsehoods. These little ones are the opposite of the skeptical theologians

whom Christ battled (cf. 5:21; 20:2). Those who receive the kingdom like a little child have the saving element of faith. They have belief plus trust. They believe in Jesus, but it is more than a mind-belief—they trust Jesus for everything to do with salvation and life.

Second, untutored humility. Children do not engage in the various forms of pride of adulthood. Unlike the Pharisees, little children are not proud of their virtues—"God, I think you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get" (18:11, 12). A child does not battle self-righteousness in coming to Christ—"Lord, I have been constant in my attendance for years. I have sat at the Lord's Table for half a century. I give a lot of money to missions." Self-righteousness is impossible in a child!

Further, a little child is free from the pride of knowledge. He has no learning, no degrees to pile up before the cross. Intellectual conceit is impossible. Children are teachable too. They receive the gospel without proposing amendments to it. They hold no "Jesus seminars"! Because children have not developed the pride of adulthood, they readily repent. Little ones will readily cry over a wrong done. Their unseared consciences have left their powerful moral instruments intact—and they are utterly miserable over their sins. Untutored humility leaves a young soul open to receiving the greatest of gifts.

Third, untarnished receptivity. Children know how to receive a gift—they simply take it. At their first birthday, they are not sure what a gift is. As two-year-olds, if they have siblings, they understand well enough. And by the time they are three, they are really into receptivity! The wrapping paper flies! As David Goodling explains: "A little child takes its food, its parents' love and protection, because they are given, without beginning to think of whether it deserves them or whether it is important enough to merit such attention. So must we all receive God's kingdom and enter into it (see 18:17).

Fourth, unabashed love. Children easily return love for loving gifts. Enthusiastic hugs and kisses and multiple "Thanks" are showered on the giver. And spiritually, "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Unabashed love is the province of those who receive the kingdom as little children.

<https://faculty.wts.edu/posts/enteringthekingdomaschildren/>

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