

Let the Children Come!

Mark 10:1-16 (ESV)

February 2, 2003

“Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” “And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.” Here is the gospel of Jesus Christ, in word and deed. He called the children to himself, and he gathered them to himself. This is the grace of God, and it is our salvation.

“Let the children come to me.” Vetoing the rebukes of his disciples, escalating his controversy with the Pharisees, and staring death in the face, Jesus called the children to himself. This is who he was. This is what he was about. This is what he did. He called the children to himself, as his very own. And he continues to call us to himself today, as his very own. Thanks be to God!

“Let the children come to me.” What a strange idea! Jesus had already surrounded himself with a motley crew of disciples: fishermen, tax collectors, and such. He had already alienated the religious leadership of the day. It was bad enough that great crowds of common people were hanging on his every word. Then he called little children to himself. They could not contribute to his cause. They could not argue the fine points of the law. They could not help or protect him. All they could do was receive his grace. And there is nothing in all the world more important than that.

“Let the children come to me.” As Jesus called the children to himself, he was by that very word not only naming them as his own but also making them his own, reconciling them to himself, restoring them to relationship with himself and therefore with God. So it is today. As Jesus calls us to himself, that very call is a word of grace, reclaiming us as his very own, standing against every other claim on our lives, overriding the other inclinations of our souls, creating a new reality, making us his own. For his word is powerful and not to be denied.

“Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” “And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.” In deed as well as word, in fact as well as name, right there for all the world to see, Jesus not only called the children to himself but also gathered the children to himself. “He took them in his arms and blessed them.” The grace of God is not simply an idea. The salvation he has won for us is reality. And when Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross, he opened them far enough to gather even us to himself, as far away as we are today. We have sinned against him mightily. We

have run away. We have hidden. We have struggled. And he still calls and gathers us as his very own. Thanks be to God!

“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” What does this mean? I suspect there are no illusions here about the innocence of children. Children can be even more self-centered than adults. But children then and now are utterly dependent. They cannot take care of themselves. They cannot provide for themselves. They cannot make their own way in the world. They depend upon others for life and well-being. So are we to enter the kingdom of God not under the presumption of our own strength or goodness but in the realization and appreciation of God’s goodness and mercy to us. He and he alone is rock solid and dependable. We can trust in him.

It is this foundation of God’s dependability that undergirds the hard teachings of Jesus Christ. We can back our way into them from this underlying reality. The reason Jesus speaks so strongly against divorce and the dissolution of marriage is that God is rock solid dependable and that God is gathering us into eternal relationships. Marriage is not eternal. We know that. Marriage is part of the order of creation, part of this passing world. And yet, God yearns for us to begin to know, to begin to experience, to begin to share the wonder and the joy of his dependability toward us. So marriage is a good gift of his to some of us here. We dare not despise it, even while we realize that the gift of the kingdom of God yet to come is infinitely greater.

We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That is manifestly obvious on every page of scripture and in every human life. So that is not a question. At the same time, it is never the purpose of God’s forgiveness simply to excuse our sin. It is the purpose of God’s forgiveness to redeem us from our sin, to reclaim us as his own, to turn our lives around, and to give us a fresh start, a new beginning. We are not forgiven so that we may keep on sinning. We are forgiven so that we may experience and realize the grace of God, the love of God, the tender mercy of God by which he reclaims us as his own, lifts us out of our failures and rebellions, and teaches us again to depend upon him.

Whatever else God is—loving, just, forgiving, holy, hidden, revealed, close at hand, high above—whatever else God is, God is faithful. This is nowhere named in today’s reading, but it is everywhere indicated. Behind the law is the giver of the law, the God of order and of justice. Behind the wonderful mystery of our maleness and femaleness is God the Creator who wills both the distinction and the union. Behind the command for faithfulness is the God who always and forever keeps faith with us. Behind the strong language against divorce is the stronger forgiveness of God who has reason in the unfaithfulness of humanity to leave every one of us, but who refuses to abandon or forsake a single one of us! Behind the disciples who

were chasing children away and in Jesus who welcomed and hugged and blessed them, is the God of love who welcomes us all no matter how far away we might have wandered, the God of love who gathers us all in loving embrace, no matter how far away we might have run, the God of love who blesses even us, from whose lips so many unholy curses have come.

Every aspect of today's reading points to the faithfulness of God, a faithfulness not only beyond what we deserve and expect but undoubtedly beyond our imagination and our ability to comprehend. What does this mean for us? It means that we who are not very dependable, and we who live in a world that is not always dependable, nevertheless can depend upon God, who is faithful and constant in love, care, and forgiveness, and in willing and working good. It also means that the God of the covenant, the God of promises, the God of faithfulness, provides both the pattern and the power for faithfulness in human relationships. Because God is faithful to us in all circumstances, we are commanded to be faithful to each other in marriage as well as in other relationships of promise and commitment. God's faithfulness stands above us, calling and leading us toward ever greater faithfulness and commitment.

In addition to God's faithfulness to us, God also has a purpose for us. God has a plan, a reason, a design, a goal, an intention, a grand purpose for all that he does. What is that purpose? Quite simply, God's purpose is to gather us all into a believing, worshipping, serving fellowship with himself and therefore with each other. This is God's purpose for all of life, all of creation and salvation. God thought about us by name before creation, and then made the whole universe as a place for this holy fellowship to happen. This purpose is the reason for creation. This purpose is the reason for our existence.

If you think the purpose, goal, and meaning of life is to get rich, or to seek pleasure, or to outsmart other people, or anything else, you will be ultimately and terribly disappointed. So why waste your life pursuing wrong goals? If you realize that the purpose, goal, and meaning of life is to glorify God and to enjoy fellowship with him and with each other, then you will be ultimately and wonderfully fulfilled. Part of the work of Jesus Christ is to align our lives with the purpose of God.

Jesus calls and gathers us into the fellowship of the kingdom of God. We are welcomed into a life of love and fellowship with God and with each other, and that is our very salvation. "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." "And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them."

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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