

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Enter Like a Child

Mark 10:13-16

While browsing through family photos, I came across one of me helping Bethany learn how to ride her bike. I remember those days of adventure and anxiety, giving her permission to ride the bike, complete with training wheels, up and down the driveway, and eventually beyond the end of our driveway, and then a short distance up the street to visit one of her friends. Many of you know from your own experience, past and present, what it's like to gradually expand the space that you give your child to develop their independence. You know that it involves some risks, as well as some deeply satisfying rewards.

Bethany has come a long way since then. Now she's driving her own car up and down the freeways of San Diego. Though considering the nature of San Diego traffic, maybe she should have kept wearing that helmet she had on in the bicycle photo. To this day, what childhood adventure would be complete without parents asking the question, "Where's your helmet?" Bicycling, skateboarding, rollerblading, scootering—these are just some of the activities that require at least a helmet, and sometimes lots of other accessories, such as gloves, knee pads, shin guards, goggles, and the list goes on. Gone are the days when you could just run out the door, hop on your bike, and zip several blocks down the street without thinking about whether you're wearing the appropriate protective gear.

Though children have always required an extra measure of care and protection, there's never been anything like today's level of security. Before it closed a few years ago, our church's day care center used a security system on the front door that granted access only if you were using an electronic key fob. We had an arrangement with a company that produced ID cards for the children, to be used in case a child was missing. We required a background check on all of the day care employees. That's something we continue to require of all volunteers who serve in our church's ministries with children and youth.

Speaking of which, we're rejoicing that our nursery ministry has reopened this morning. Rachel Proctor has agreed to lead that part of our congregation's life, as we welcome our church family's youngest ones and bless their lives with the love and care of Christ. Our nursery has been largely inactive since Covid-19, so we're thankful that following the pandemic, the space itself got some refreshment and is now being reactivated for service.

The fact that we try to make our children's lives safer and more secure is just one indication of how much attention childhood gets in our culture. In many ways, we've elevated childhood to a special status. We've given it a sacred place in our society. There are certainly lots of good reasons to do so. For one thing, we recognize how much a person's childhood influences the way that the rest of his or her life turns out. We also recognize that how we raise our children will have a significant impact on the future of our families, our nation, and our world. Moreover, we see certain qualities and attitudes in children that have a lot to teach us adults as well.

But the danger in this approach is that we often have an idealized or romanticized view of childhood. Many of us see it as a time in our lives when things were much simpler and

easier, a time that we would go back to if only we had a way to roll back the clock. We're quick to associate childhood with notions of innocence, purity, and peace.

Yet it helps to remember that it hasn't always been this way. For instance, in this morning's Scripture passage from Mark, where Jesus welcomes and blesses the children, we have to be careful not to take our contemporary visions of childhood and impose them on the text. If we're going to get a fuller sense of what's going on in this scene, we have to take into account the way that children were often viewed and treated in cultures of the first century.

Though we don't know a whole lot about children in the first-century Mediterranean world, we can draw some basic conclusions that help us understand adult attitudes toward children, and the conditions of children's lives, during that day and time. For one thing, we know that the culture was extremely patriarchal, which meant, among other things, that male children were valued more highly than female children. Moreover, compared to our definitions of childhood, their understanding of the number of years for childhood was smaller. For instance, girls were usually promised and given in marriage by their mid-teens, and boys only somewhat later. For the father of the household, it was important that the daughters be able to marry. This would help extend the honor and financial security of the family. Having sons also helped ensure the family lineage and maintain control over land and other property. If you were part of a peasant family, it was important to have lots of sons and daughters to contribute to the family workforce. In some cases, children were even abandoned or sold into slavery.¹

I don't want to go into extended detail on this issue. I simply want to give you a basic sense of some of the differences between our contemporary vision of childhood and what childhood was really like at ground level for boys and girls in first-century Palestine. I'm not trying to paint an overly bleak picture. I'm sure boys and girls in that day and time did and enjoyed many of the things that boys and girls do and enjoy in our day and time. But I do want us to be careful about taking a dreamy, idealized view of childhood and using that as a lens to interpret our Scripture from Mark. As best we can tell, in the first-century world, children were pushed more to the margins of society rather than being the center of attention as often happens in modern culture.

So we shouldn't be completely surprised that in this scene where Jesus wants to welcome the children, his disciples are busy trying to exclude the children and push them out of the picture. Now in one respect, we have to acknowledge that the disciples were just trying to enforce the social mores of the day. Children shouldn't be allowed to disturb the teacher and his students. That's understandable. But there's more going on here than that. Jesus actually seizes the opportunity to remind his disciples that the kingdom of God he preaches and teaches stresses inclusion rather than exclusion. And to make that point, he gladly receives the children whose parents have come seeking his blessing.

In his version of this story, Mark says that Jesus was "indignant" with his disciples for hindering the children. So Jesus wasn't just mildly irritated by his disciples' behavior. He was intensely angry. He says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (v. 14).

"Stop trying to nudge these children out to the edge of things," says Jesus to his disciples. "Clearly, you still don't understand how things work in the kingdom of God." Remember that shortly before this Scripture passage, the disciples had been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. In that case, Jesus took a child into his arms and told the disciples that those who receive a child receive him, and those who receive him receive God.

So a few passages later, here we are again, with Jesus elevating children in order to make a point about the reign of God. "Let those children come to me," says Jesus. "Don't you see, these children are the very epitome of why the reign of God has come. The kingdom of God belongs to people like these children."

What does Jesus mean? He means that the kingdom of God exists for people like these children. And what does he see in these children that he sees in other people who are responding to his ministry and coming into God's kingdom? He sees receptiveness, openness, a willingness to trust. But I believe Jesus sees much more. He looks at these children and also sees people who, like most others who've received his message, are on the margins of society.

Again, remember not to read this text as if children had as elevated a status in Jesus' time as they do in our time. In Jesus' time, children had no status or power. In the eyes of many, children were not considered persons in their own right. They were therefore among the least and the lowly of society. In many respects, they were vulnerable, helpless, ignored, and overlooked. No wonder Jesus welcomed them and lifted them up as an example of what makes a person ready for and receptive to the reign of God. After all, with which people did Jesus spend most of his time and energy and ministry? With those who had been pushed to the edge of society and excluded from life in the community of God's people. He went to the margins of life, bringing good news to those who had been left out, including the children.

I don't think it's just a matter of story flow that right after the passage about Jesus blessing the children there's an account of a rich man who comes to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Compared to children, and to most of the other marginalized people in society, this man is a rousing success. He's powerful and prosperous. His religious resume is long and impressive. He's a high achiever with lots of energy and motivation. By most standards, he has it all. But Jesus tells him that if he wants to become a disciple, he needs to liquidate his assets and give it all to the poor. Now, letting go of his money would be hard enough. But surrendering his goods would also mean relinquishing the status and power that come with his wealth. Despite his sincere devotion to the Word of God, the rich man cannot bring himself to accept Jesus' call. He departs in sadness.

The rich man who says no to Jesus' invitation is such a contrast to those who are saying yes. According to Jesus, those who are able to enter the kingdom of God aren't like the successful, self-reliant adult. On the contrary, they're like the vulnerable, needy child. They know what it means to be humble, helpless, dependent, weak, and at risk. They know that they are totally reliant upon the grace and provision of God, who welcomes them, includes them, and blesses them.

Many things about childhood have changed between Jesus' time and our time. But one thing that hasn't changed is a child's vulnerability. To this day, children are still some of the most at risk, exploited, neglected, and victimized members of our society. It's no wonder we try to make sure they're wearing their helmets, avoiding online predators, and staying away from strangers. We realize how utterly dependent they are on adults for daily life and security.

Jesus says that if you want to follow him, you must enter into the life of the vulnerable child. This means setting aside all those things that you rely upon for power, status, and security. It means letting go of all the things you cling to for eternal life, realizing that salvation comes only from the Lord. It also means identifying with, spending time with, and entering into the experience of those in our own day and time who are vulnerable, neglected, mistreated, or marginalized—the sick, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, and

many others. By doing so, you extend the invitation to the kingdom of God, and you gain an even deeper sense of your own vulnerability, your own great need for grace, mercy, and blessing.

¹ The summary is based on James L. Bailey, "Experiencing the Kingdom as a Little Child: A Rereading of Mark 10:13-16," *Word & World* (Winter 1995) 65.