

**And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.**

**(Mark 10:13–16)**

## Introduction

The well-known children's taunt explains the way that things, in God's design, is meant to work: "Doug and Jill, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g! First comes love, then comes marriage, the comes a baby in a baby carriage."

A lot has changed since I was a child, but this still reflects a normal pattern – love, marriage, then babies. This pattern is reflected in the text before us: first marriage, then children.

Jesus had just confronted the hard-hearted Pharisees; now he confronted his hard-hearted disciples. The Pharisees viewed women as insignificant and therefore had hardened attitudes about divorce rather than a positive commitment to honour the marriage covenant. But here we see a similar hardness on the part of disciples towards children. Just as Jesus corrected the Pharisees, so now corrected the disciples. No doubt, Jesus spoke the words of vv. 5–9 with great intensity. Here, he spoke with great indignation.

As often noted, in discipling the future leaders of his church, Jesus was seeking to transform their worldview. The Christian life is radically different in the way it views the world and those who live in the world. What the world despises, marginalises, and deems insignificant, Jesus loves, pays attention to, and views as significant. Conversely, what the world values, prioritises, and pursues, Jesus devalues, puts at the end of the queue, and often turns away from. We have examples of this in the opening three pericopes in Mark 10.

The world – even the religious world – marginalised women and therefore held skewed views of marriage. Jesus protected women by reestablishing God's model of marriage (vv. 1–12).

The world minimised the value of children while at the same time minimising God's grace to them. Jesus affectionately received them into his kingdom (vv. 13–16).

The world prioritised material possessions and pursued them as a goal in life. Jesus revealed the folly of such a worldview (vv. 17–31).

This three-part section of Mark concludes with the words, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (v. 31). This sums up so much of what Jesus was teaching his disciples.

Disciples of Jesus must learn to see people (women and children), partnerships (marriage), parenting, and possessions as Jesus does. These men would eventually get it. Will we?

But further, fundamental to how we see others is often how we see ourselves. The pericope before us pointedly proves this.

This, of course, is not the first time Jesus used children to train adults. You will remember how, earlier, these adults were acting infantile, arguing about who among them was the greatest. At that time, Jesus took a little child in his arms, pointed to him, and said, “Whoever welcomes one little child such as this in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but him who sent me” (9:37).

Jesus instructed them that the greatest in the kingdom are the most insignificant, which means that everyone in the kingdom is insignificant. This is how we are to see ourselves. As Paul put it, “in humility consider others more important than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3) and, “I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think” (Romans 13:3).

But the disciples were far too much like you and me: slow learners and fast forgetters. They have soon forgotten this principle and their practice shows it.

## Believing Parents

The text begins with a tender scene: “And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them” (v. 13). I assume that “they” were the parents of the children in question. We should learn from this scene that parents who believe in Jesus will bring their children to him.

Presumably, parents were bringing their children for a “touch” from Jesus. This is an interesting word, since most of its occurrences in the New Testament refer to the presenting of an offering. In fact, the book of Hebrews uses it that way sixteen times. Mark’s only other use of the term is found in 1:44 where Jesus commanded the healed leper to go to the temple and offer a sacrifice as a testimony to his cleansing, in accordance with old covenant law.

We are therefore justified to assume that that these parents were coming to Jesus with their children as an act of worship. They must have believed that there was something in the person of Jesus that would bless their children. Though I am not sure I could go as far as Sinclair Ferguson in arguing that these parents were disciples of Jesus (though they may have been), nonetheless we must commend them for their assumption that Jesus in the life of their child would be a blessed benefit.

### Desperate for a Touch

Throughout Mark, the touch of Jesus results in great blessing (1:41; 3:10; 5:27; 6:56; 7:33; 8:22). These parents insightfully, and I believe responsibly, brought their children to Jesus for his blessing, even his salvific blessing, in their life. Those who brought their children to Jesus believed that his touch could help their child. And they were willing to face the hostility of Pharisees as well as the haughtiness of disciples to secure this touch.

It was true in that day that well-known rabbis were sometimes seen almost as rock stars, and perhaps these parents wanted to give their children a spiritual advantage. All I can say is, well done! What kind of heroes have captivated the hearts and minds of your family?

### Belligerent Disciples

Sadly, almost unbelievably, “the disciples rebuked” (v. 13) these parents and their children. (The original wording seems to indicate the rebuke was aimed primarily at the children.)

The word translated “rebuked” is a strong word, used by Mark when Jesus rebuked demons (1:25; 9:25), the wind and the stormy sea (4:39), and Peter’s Satanic thinking (8:33). The disciples, it would appear, were being harsh—even mean—as they issued this rebuke, which at least included the children. What was their problem?

Perhaps they thought that Jesus was too busy and so were guarding his time. Surely he shouldn’t be bothered with a bunch of little children who had nothing to offer? I guess they did not consider that these children had their entire lives to offer to him. The story is told that Charles Spurgeon was once asked if any conversions had taken place in his church recently. He replied, “Two and a half.” The enquirer asked, “Two adults and a child?” Spurgeon corrected him: “Two children and an adult. The children have a full life to give to the Lord while the adult has but perhaps very little time left.” Great answer.

I think there was another problem—an even more serious one. Perhaps they were zealously and jealously guarding their own privileged position. They were thinking and behaving like the world, not like disciples of Jesus. Like Peter in chapter 8, their minds were not set on the things of God but rather on the things of man (8:33). Just as the Pharisees had embraced a hardened worldview concerning women, the disciples apparently couldn’t shake wrong, hardened, and even harmful estimations concerning the dignity and the value of children.

The Gentile view of children had corrupted a right view once held by God’s people (Psalm 127). A letter from an ancient Roman father has been found in which he told his pregnant wife that, if it was a boy, she should let him live but, if a girl, she should turn her out to exposure. I’m not saying that the disciples held such an extreme view. I am saying that, clearly, they did not see children as they should have. They did not see them as Jesus did. Do we?

Far too many Christians have worldly attitudes about having children. Far too many minimise the spiritual good that can be done for children and hence neglect their churches. Adults sometimes arrogantly assume that adults come to Christ because they are so clever and that children are not intelligent enough to do so. The disciples had this attitude. Jesus was not happy at all.

## Blessed Saviour

In the remainder of the text (vv. 14–16), Jesus confronted and corrected the wrongheadedness of his disciples. He disciplined them about the place of children in the kingdom of God and about the pattern that children are for all those, of any age, who will receive and enter the kingdom of God.

## Jesus Was Grieved

We are told that Jesus was “indignant” (v. 14). This is the only time in the Gospels that Jesus is described as “indignant,” and the word so translated is a strong one. It carries the sense of much grief and sore displeasure. It implies a strong annoyance (see Mark 14:4).

Let’s reflect for a moment on the folly of doing something which makes Jesus annoyed, even indignant. That is not a wise way to live. So, we would do well to know whatever it was that made Jesus so displeased and then to avoid doing that. I think that we may be in for a surprise, because Jesus’ teaching about children remains very countercultural. In other words, we have met these disciples and they are us!

The KJV famously reads, “Suffer the little children to come unto me.” The archaic term “suffer” means “to allow” or, as the ESV has it, “let.” The older translation prompts me with a thought within this text that, if we do not suffer our children to come to Jesus, they may eternally suffer without him. Parents be careful. Christian be careful. Robertson said it nearly a hundred years ago: “There are parents who will have to give answer to God for keeping their children away from Jesus.”

Church member be careful – let the children come to Jesus!

Now there is nothing in this, or in any other text in the Bible, which teaches that children are naturally drawn to the Lord Jesus—at least not in a saving way (see Romans 3:9–18; Ephesians 2:1–3). However, children are drawn to Jesus by his kindness, his loving and tender humility, and his compassion. Many adults are equally impressed with these qualities of Jesus and are drawn to him because of it. This is good. It opens a door. (Be careful, therefore, how you portray and how you display Jesus before a watching world.) And though, of course, this is not enough (for we must all repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved from our sins), nevertheless it is a good starting point. We must

beware lest we do anything that would get between a child and Jesus. Let them come to him!

Let us do so by showing his attractiveness from Scripture. (Reformed bulldogs should pay attention here!) Let us do so by pointing to his compassionate and courageous protection of his own. Let us do so by pointing to the ultimate expression of this at Calvary.

We too easily are guilty of minimising the value of children, just like these disciples. We who are in sound Bible-believing churches are prone to arrogantly complicate the gospel of Jesus Christ thereby marginalizing the interest (and, in many cases, the insight) of children concerning this gospel. Again, listen and obey the words of Jesus Christ: “Let the children come to me!”

## Help, Don't Hinder

Jesus emphasised his exhortation by adding the words, “Do not hinder them.” He forbade his disciples from forbidding, withstanding, or preventing these (and other) children from gaining access to him.

In Luke 11:52, we read Jesus' rebuke of the Jewish religious leaders when he said, “Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.” Though it is not an exact parallel, nevertheless the rebuke of these disciples implies something similar: Those who should have known better were hindering, rather than helping, others to join in the kingdom blessings of King Jesus.

Are we doing something similar when it comes to the children in our homes? When it comes to children in our church?

## Of what Sort?

As we unpack this text, it will become clear that those who undervalue and therefore hinder children from entering the kingdom are actually hindering themselves from entering the kingdom of God.

Jesus said that children should not be forbidden from coming to him. They must not be prevented by our bad behaviour from coming to him because “to such belongs the kingdom of God.” What did he mean?

He certainly did not mean that all children are in the kingdom of God. If that were true then no one would ever be excluded from the kingdom since every human being entering this world enters as a child!

Neither does this passage teach infant baptism. I read two arguments this week seeking to establish this. The fact that there is no water in the text suggests that there is nothing that points to such teaching – either here or elsewhere.

## What Was Jesus Saying?

Jesus was saying that children are the sort of people who are in the kingdom of God. He made this more explicit when he said, “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” In other words, if you will be saved and enter God’s everlasting kingdom, you must be the sort of person a young child is. But what does that mean?

As we’ve discussed before, it doesn’t mean innocent, good, or selfless (especially not selfless!). What it does mean is that they are helplessly dependent. In the words of the songwriter, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to your cross I cling; naked come to you for dress: helpless, look to you for grace.”

Note that the children were brought to Jesus. They did not come on their own. They were dependent upon others. They were recipients of grace. They did not earn God’s favour. They had nothing to offer Jesus; in fact they came merely to receive. And they did receive (v.16)! Witherington helpfully summarises,

Notice that Jesus says nothing about building or accomplishing the dominion or making it happen, but only of receiving or entering it.... Jesus is not romanticizing children or childhood as a time of innocence. His point is that children are content to receive something as a gift, and this is the proper way all persons should receive the dominion of divine saving activity of God.

So it is with any who will enter the kingdom of God. So it is with any who will be saved from their sins. Salvation is a free gift of God and the only ones who can receive it are those who reckon they don’t deserve it. Perhaps that is why Jesus was so “indignant.” Perhaps his disciples were arrogantly assuming they deserved God’s grace while these pesky little critters certainly had done nothing to deserve his attention. All they did was lay in his arms. Then again, perhaps that was his very point!

James Edwards helpfully points to a major lesson for those who are followers of Jesus, “In this story children are not blessed for their virtues but for what they *lack*: they come only as they are – small, powerless, without sophistication, as the overlooked and dispossessed of society.”

We learn from this that those who follow Jesus recognise themselves to be small and powerless and are willing to be overlooked and disposed, including a willingness to be viewed as without sophistication. This is Jesus emphasis in saying, “for to such belongs the

kingdom of God” (v. 14), and “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (v. 15). Those who receive the gift of his kingdom, who by grace are granted access, do so with childlike simplicity and childlike trust.

We must learn from this to drop all pretence that the kingdom of God is about sophistication. That is, we need to be done with trying to impress the world with how “cool” it is to be a Christian. We need to stop trying to impress the world that following Jesus is okay because, after all, look at the smart and successful people who are Christians. There is nothing impressive about a child laying in the arms of a mother. In fact, if you pay close attention, you will be impressed with the mother rather than the child!

Some time ago, a little girl we were temporarily housing ended up in a local government hospital. While beds were provided for the children, nothing was provided for the parents. My wife and one daughter took turns sleeping on the hard, cold hospital floor to care for her. As I went to visit, and saw mothers scattered across the floor, I thought that the real heroes in the picture were the mothers, not the children.

As followers of Jesus, we are impressed with him, rather than with those who follow him. At least, we should be. Was this not the problem with the Twelve? Their attitude conveyed, that Jesus was too important to be bothered with little children and that kingdom stuff was for adults. They were reverting to their earlier mentality: “We tried to stop people from advancing the kingdom who are not with us” (vv. 38–41). Here, as there, the disciples needed to repent of both arrogance and self-sufficiency. They needed the reminder that salvation is of the Lord. They needed to remember that they did not choose Jesus, but rather he chose them. They needed to relearn that they do not deserve entrance to the kingdom. They needed to realise that there is no inherent reason why they were blessed to receive the kingdom of God. That is, they needed to view Jesus and his offer of saving grace like a little child!

As France notes, “The reason the disciples were unable to appreciate the significance of children in relation to the kingdom of God is that they themselves have not yet learned to ‘receive’ it like children.” Those who enter the kingdom and who receive the King are those who do so unconditionally and with open arms.

### Jesus Was Grave

Jesus responded gravely to his disciples: “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” Whenever you hear him say, “Truly, I say,” you should pay very close attention. Jesus was about to provide a sobering summary of his teaching with respect to children, discipleship, and his kingdom.

Someone has commented that, in these verses, “those commended become role models, while those corrected become warnings.” The children serve as a blessed example to the

adults and the poor response of adults becomes a warning to those who act like them. For the disciples, this would have been a rather humbling scene, especially since, not too long ago, Jesus had told them something very similar.

Jesus emphatically declared, with the use of a double negative to drive home his point, that unless one becomes helpless and trusting like a little child, that person will never enter the kingdom of God. Would-be disciples must receive the gift of reception by God as a gift! Forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption are only received by those with empty hands. This involves renouncing self and letting go of any and all pretence concerning what we think we deserve from God.

A corollary to this is the mindset that no longer categorises people as “deserving” and “undeserving.” It requires a rejection of the wickedly arrogant worldview that embraces a caste system of the important, the less-important, and the unimportant. The gospel of Jesus Christ levels the playing field. It is often said that we all stand level at the cross. Perhaps it could be better said that we are *laid* level at the cross.

The kingdom of God, as taught by Jesus, is both a thing to be accepted and a realm to enter. They go together like two sides of a coin. When you accept Jesus as your King, you are granted access to his kingdom. He who receives you also now rules you. And that is great news!

Children, of course, rebel against authority. They are guilty sometimes of disobedience. Yet largely, they get it that someone is going to tell them what to do. And, in most cases, those who “rule” them do so because they love them. So it is with Jesus and those who follow him.

When we are born again, we willingly receive what Jesus offers. But with the reception of our Redeemer, we also receive our Ruler. As we lay in his arms, so to speak, we realise our helplessness apart from him. Therefore, we gladly trust him enough to obey him. This is what some refer to as lordship salvation. That language is sort of redundant, in my opinion. Nevertheless, the point is that those who receive Jesus as Saviour by default receive him as Lord. Such childlike disposition remains the characteristic of the Christian. In fact, over time, it will grow.

Augustine was asked about three marks of a Christian? He answered, “Humility. Humility. Humility.” Good answer. The Christian lives life in dependence upon God. We call this humility. “Total trust is the centre of a child’s existence. So it must be for the disciple.... They cannot earn it or deserve it or make it, but only accept it thankfully as God’s gift” (English).

What flows from this is a commitment to do what Jesus says. Believers are quite content to confess that, apart from him, they can do nothing (John 15:5) and therefore they are willing to do anything he says.

## Jesus Was Gracious

Finally, we learn that Jesus was gracious: “And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them” (v. 16). A. W. Tozer, in his classic book, *The Pursuit of God*, has a chapter titled, “The Blessedness of Possessing Nothing.” That is a wonderful summary of the passage that follows but it is also apropos for this episode.

The children were lifted up, held by Jesus, blessed by Jesus, and they simply received it. They possessed nothing, and yet the possessor of heaven and earth (Genesis 14:19, 22) possessed them! What a wonderful picture and description of a Christian.

The Greek text helps us to understand that this was an ongoing action. He kept doing this. We have no way of knowing how many children were there, but Jesus tirelessly, and without weariness, kept on blessing them. Perhaps at some point a disciple or two got in the queue!

Is this not precisely what we want for our children? If this is not your greatest passion and priority for your children, you have lost the plot and need this reminder of what that plot is.

## Speaking the Truth in Love

In recent studies, I have sought to faithfully expound the words of Jesus on some very emotional, controversial matters. I have tried to do so with a shepherd’s sensitivity. I need the same here.

There are parents reading this, I have no doubt, whose hearts are broken over the spiritual condition of their children and who are consequentially heartsore over their children’s lifestyle decisions. What I am about to say needs to be heard with gospel-saturated ears. It needs to be heard with hope and with a commitment to help those with young children.

I recently received a phone call from an elder of a nearby church asking my counsel on calling a new pastor-teacher. The elders had narrowed the candidates to two. One was an older man, some 25 years older than the younger candidate. The elder talking to me said that he had already been advised by an older pastor to receive the older application because it would make the older generation in the church feel more comfortable. I respectfully disagreed. I counselled him that it was a great opportunity for the church to think about the next generation and to model next-generation care in modelling care for the younger pastoral family. I know that is true because it is what happened when I came to Brackenhurst as a young pastor with a young family.

This passage addresses the hearts of the disciples who had lost the plot when it comes to what is required to receive and to enter the kingdom of God. This was evident in how they treated children. Their arrogance and their despising of these little ones gave evidence that they needed to be reminded that salvation is all of grace. This is a fundamental point of these words.

Yet it is clear from Jesus' indignation, and from his subsequent words, that another fundamental lesson is that we take great care to not hinder children from becoming disciples of Jesus. Rather than hindering them, we should do what we can to help them to become disciples of our Saviour. Evangelism and discipleship begin in the home. Literally.

Again, don't miss the obvious: These children were brought to Jesus. They did not crawl across town to get to him. Presumably, their parents brought them. God bless them!

I wonder if the twelve disciples had any children. I previously suggested that perhaps the child that Jesus took into his arms in 9:36 could have been a child of Peter's. Regardless, how sad that, if they did have children, they did not see the priority of children being brought to Jesus for his blessing.

Parents do all you can to get your children to Jesus. It is sad that many Christian parents seemingly are more concerned about their children gaining entrance into an elite school than they are about their children being granted access to the kingdom of God. Be careful, and be honest. What is your greatest passion for your children? Really.

The answer is found in what you speak about the most, what you invest your time in the most, and what you pray about the most. Be God-conscious and scripturally-minded when engaging in everyday talk and everyday life with your children. Look for gospel opportunities in discipline. Use the means of grace offered by your church family: Sunday school, youth ministry, godly friendships, etc. Parents don't allow the hardened, the clueless, the graceless to hinder you from bringing your children to Jesus. Apparently, these parents didn't.

Cole comments that the disciples demonstrated "their utter failure to understand his loving purpose, and, indeed, the whole nature of the kingdom, where none is unimportant in God's eyes." But their failure did not make these parents fail to persevere to get their children into the arms of Jesus. There are some Christians who can be painful like these disciples. Don't let them detour you from gathering your family with Jesus.

Parents, think long and hard before you leave your local church. If it is biblically faithful and biblically healthy, don't let a few problems hinder you from the arms of Jesus being extended in and to that body. *Don't hinder your children from coming to Jesus.* There are numerous ways this can happen. Be alert.

You can hinder your children by making other things than God and his kingdom a priority. So much of this has to do with how you treat the Lord's Day. Shortly after I first came to Brackenhurst, I noticed that a family who had been attending were becoming scarce in their Lord's Day attendance. I called the father, who told me that, in his desire to not lose his son, he had started prioritising his son's soccer on Sundays. I cautioned him that he may well follow a soccer ball into hell. Those were strong words, but they needed to be said.

You can hinder your children by discouraging them about the love and grace and mercy of God. The Bible calls this provoking your children to wrath.

You can hinder your children by a culture of bitterness and unforgiveness. Be gracious! Be forgiving! Be kind!

You can hinder your children by teaching them that mammon is master. You can do the same by teaching that education, career, leisure, sport, or family are master. Fathers, if you leave your children a fortune without leaving them your faith, you've not left them anything that ultimately matters.

Fathers can hinder their children by being their friend rather than being their father. If all you leave them is your friendship because you do not leave them your faith, you have failed them.

You can hinder them by treating them as insignificant. Listen to them. Be present with them and they will be present with you when you speak to them about Christ

You can hinder them by backbiting your church family, including its leaders. My father-in-law, who was my pastor for thirty years before I left my home church has a missionary, recently told me that there was a time when there had been long-standing, severe tension between him and my parents. He told me that he knew that my parents never badmouthed him at home because my siblings and I never changed in our attitude toward him. I am thankful for that.

You can hinder them by not connecting them to the body of Christ. I don't understand parents who are members of a local church and do not regularly take their children to Sunday school. What a wasted opportunity! I don't understand parents who keep their children home from church on Sunday night because Monday morning school is too important? Where are they likely to be positively impacted eternally?

You can hinder them by not proactively connecting them with those who would make true and godly friends (see Proverbs 13:20). Don't think that your prayers for your children's salvation will fill the gaps that you are unwisely creating.

Note that Jesus' attitude towards children highlights the value of godly motherhood and godly fatherhood. Believing parents are most likely to raise receiving children. Enter the kingdom yourself and it opens the door for your children to do so as well.

Having addressed parents, let me add: Church member, don't hinder children from coming to Jesus. Be a faithful disciple. Love children. Humble yourself to speak to them, minister to them, pray for them, and be patient with them. Don't be the church member who is always on the lookout for misbehaving children to correct!

### Conclusion

"The kingdom is both a gift to be received and a realm to enter" (Wessel). The question remains, have you received and entered?

How can you receive and enter the kingdom? By the loving action of Jesus. Jesus opened his arms to these children in order to bless them. He took them in his arms. He gave assurance to parents that "of such is the kingdom of God."

He could do this because, in a short while, Jesus would stretch out his arms on a cross to secure their entrance into the kingdom of God. He did that for all who will be like a little child, helplessly depending on him, and him alone, for salvation from the wrath of God and for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus died for children who would become rebellious young people who would become rebellious adults. He then rose from the dead demonstrating his power to transform rebels into submissive kingdom subjects. Are you one of those? Do you want to be? Then repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. You will be saved.

AMEN