

Jesus' Children • Luke 18:15-17

Recently I reconnected with an old friend whom I had not seen for about 25 years. He and his wife are good and godly people who are deeply committed followers of Jesus Christ. Early in their marriage they discovered they were not able to have birth children so they adopted a daughter and a son. For the past 30 years there have been constant challenges with their children—difficulties, disabilities, legal entanglements and more. Over the years I have heard a lot of painful stories and I think theirs is among the hardest of them all. And it appears that the future will be similar to the past. They are tired and not a little discouraged.

Without blaming God, they have been questioning God. Theirs is the inevitable question: Why? I told them I don't know why. I don't know why life hasn't been better or easier for them. I told them that my best guess is that a loving God decided to give a girl and a boy the very best parents he possibly could. What was very hard for my friends was very good for their children.

There are some people who never give birth but who love children very much. Among them was Jesus. Jesus never married. He never had birth children of his own. He was never blessed with grandchildren. But Jesus loved children. You can hear about it in one of the more delightful stories from Jesus' biography. It is short and sweet. It comes from Luke 18:15–17:

People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them.

But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

There was a custom in first century Israel where parents, especially mothers, would bring

their children to a distinguished rabbi to be blessed on the child's first birthday. Blessings are powerful sayings for good. It is pronouncing the very best upon another person. It is much like a prayer. Strangely, it is not a common part of our vocabulary. We are more familiar with curses like "God damn you" than with blessings like "The Lord be with you." But blessings are very powerful in transforming a person's life.

Let me retell a favorite story of mine. A well-known southern preacher and his wife went to dinner at a restaurant in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. It was to be a private, romantic evening at a table along the glass wall looking at the mountains. However, an old man who wanted to tell his story unexpectedly interrupted them.

He began the story with his illegitimate birth in a small village there in the mountains of Tennessee. He grew up under terrible pressure and shame. Even though he asked, his mother would never tell him who his father was. When he was a boy, adults would stop him on the street and stand around him discussing his physical features and trying to guess out loud who was his father. Children at school repeatedly called him the worst of names. As you can imagine, deep wounds left deep scars on his young life.

As he neared his teens, one day he heard some music coming from a country church. He wandered in, sat in the back and listened to the sermon. The large man who was the preacher connected to the boy's

heart and he kept coming back. But he always came late and left early so that no one could talk to him, hurt him and humiliate him.

One Sunday morning he was so caught up in all that was happening that he didn't leave soon enough and the preacher caught him before he got away. His large hand touched the boy's shoulder and in his booming voice he said, "Boy, you look like . . ."

...anyone who wants to become a Christian must have faith like that of a child.

The boy's heart sank. He had heard this line so many times before. He dreaded what the preacher would say next. He did not want to hear it. He did not want to be hurt once more. Not here. Not by him.

He tried to run away but the large man wouldn't let him go until he finished. He said, "Yes, boy, you have a striking resemblance to God. You must be a son of God."

The old man telling his story said, "I was born again that day. Those words changed my life forever. I saw myself in an entirely new way."

With his story finished the old man in the restaurant started to walk away. The man at the table called after him, "Old man, you never told us your name. What is your name?" He looked back and said, "Hooper, Ben Hooper," and left.

It was then that the man at the table turned to his wife and said, "There was a Ben Hooper who was an illegitimate child from the mountains who was elected and served four years as the governor of Tennessee. He must be that man."

You see, he was blessed and the blessing changed his life.

It is a powerful thing to be blessed by someone who knows and loves God. That is why Jewish mothers brought their babies to rabbis. That is why these "*people were also bringing their babies to Jesus to have him touch them.*"

"*When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them.*" Please understand where the disciples were coming from. It is not that they were against children or their parents. They knew Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus was on a mission and did not need any delays or distractions. I think many of us might have done what those disciples did. Jesus is the Son of God who was sent to seek and to save those who were lost. His destiny was to die on the cross to pay for human sin. Nothing was more important. Nothing could get in the way. Nothing could stop him. He could not put off the cross to touch children en route.

This is like a wife protecting her husband from their children. He has come home from a demanding and difficult day and has the most important job interview of his life scheduled for the next morning. His children want to talk and play but

he really needs to get some rest. It is for them that he is working so hard and needs the job. So, she says, "Leave Daddy alone." But dad interrupts and says that he wants to make time for them. He bends over to pick them up. Then he gets down on the floor to play.

That is the way Jesus was. He made time for the children even though he was on his way to die.

I love Jesus' words to all his followers—to the parents, to the children and to anyone else who would listen. He said, "*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.*" They were words for that day and they are words for today. Jesus loves children. Jesus wants children. Jesus asks everyone to do whatever needs to be done in order to bring children to him.

Research statistics indicate that personal faith in Jesus Christ is most likely to occur when people are younger. The likelihood of a five-year old giving her heart to Jesus for a lifetime is quite good. The likelihood of a 50-year old giving his heart to Jesus is comparatively slim. The likelihood of a 95-year old becoming a Christian is close to zero.

Begin young and redeem a life. Wait and risk losing the person forever. Thank God for those who bring children to Jesus. Thank God for every godly mother and father who prays by a child's bedside. Thank God for every parent who reads the Bible at home. Thank God for every Sunday School teacher who invests in young lives forever. Thank God for parents who give high priority to church involvement for the sake of their children. Thank God for grandparents who pray their grandchildren into the kingdom of God.

Some day in heaven when we are evaluating our lives some of us may find that many of the things we thought were important in this life were actually worthless and that those who brought children to Jesus did the very best of all.

Let us hear and heed the words of Jesus to "*Let the little children come to me, and not hinder them . . .*" Bring them for Jesus' touch on their lives. Turn someone like Ben Hooper into a child of God through your blessing.

Jesus went far beyond the children he touched

that day and taught one of his greatest principles of faith. He taught that everyone must become like a child. Jesus said, *“I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*

This may not be easy to understand quickly, but if we can truly grasp what Jesus is here saying, we may have one of the greatest spiritual secrets of the universe. Jesus is not saying that we have to become children to become Christians. He is not suggesting that adults must behave or think childishly. He is saying that anyone who wants to become a Christian must have faith like that of a child. That begs the questions: What is a child like? How does a child think and behave? How are children different from adults?

Children trust. They have to trust others, but they do that intuitively. A child has no job or money or power or possessions. Children must trust others for the next meal, for clothes, for a parent’s protection and for a place to sleep. When a child gets on a bus or plane or a ride at the amusement park, that child trusts his or her parents to provide the money for the ticket.

It never occurs to children that they have to take care of themselves.

Children are quick to obey. The first instinct of a baby is to conform to the will of the mother and father. It is only as they get older that they become more independent and possibly rebellious.

Children are believers. Faith comes easily to a child. Doubt is something that we learn as we grow older. Only as we become proud and sophisticated and think we are smart do we journey into doubt. But we all start out as believers.

Children are lovers. They naturally love their parents. Relationships are everything and possessions are nothing. Babies don’t care if they live in nice houses or ride in expensive cars. All they care about is mother’s touch and father’s voice.

There is simplicity about childhood that too many of us outgrow. It is not that we should be naive or foolish or ignorant. Our relationship to

God is possible only when we connect with God like a child to a parent. We willingly come to trust, to obey, to believe and to love.

To be childlike in relation to God is to be responsive to God’s unconditional love. It means taking God at his word, trusting him to provide for our basic needs, loving him with all our hearts and more than anything else in the world. To be a child of God is exactly that: to love, trust, believe and obey God as our loving Father.

There is a risk of misunderstanding here because some may say, “Should I park my brain; should I not have doubts? Is there no place for hard questions?” This is not a call to curl up in a fetal position and become passive persons in the hands of a supernatural parent.

God is not threatened by our questions. God is not intimidated by our doubts. God does not want us to forsake our identity and individuality.

However, we must eventually come to the point that we are like children who choose to acknowledge that we are small and helpless and that God is grand and powerful. I suppose another word for it is humility. We must admit that we are not smart enough,

strong enough or good enough on our own. We need God. We must become like children. If we do not, we will never enter the kingdom of God.

This story from Jesus’ biography especially touches my life because in so many ways it’s about me. I went to school for 30 years. I studied Latin, Hebrew and Greek. I read philosophers, poets, theologians and scientists. I have spent most of my adult life studying the Bible. Yet, increasingly I find myself coming to the Bible and simply saying, “I believe it is the word of God.” I have not abandoned what I have been taught, but I seem to be able to understand the Bible only when I read it as a child would read it.

I try to work hard and accomplish good with my life. I have a busy schedule with too many responsibilities. I find that the only way I can make it is to continuously tell God that I am in over my head. I am not smart enough. I can’t work hard

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enough. I don't have enough experience. I must completely rely on him.

I want to love God. I try to tell God every day that I love him. Every time I drink the cup at communion I say, "I love you!" But the truth is that I am not all that good at loving God. I just need to be loved by him. I need to receive his unconditional love. I must accept the fact that he loves me more than I could ever love myself. I don't understand it. It doesn't even make sense to me. I am just loved.

I guess all of this makes me childlike. Bur, what about you? Don't you want to just be the child of God?

People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth,

anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Father, hear us, your children, as we declare that

we trust you fully, that we believe in you wholly, that we

will obey you absolutely and that we love you. Thank you,

Father, for the privilege of being your children.

In Jesus' name, amen.

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