

Mark: Children!

Mark 10:13-16

By Dr. Derek Thomas

April 17, 2005

Please be seated. Now, just in case you were wondering why we were singing a Christmas carol—I love it when we sing these Christmas carols out of season!—of course, it's a reminder that our blessed Lord and Savior became incarnate, and became an infant and a little child. And our theme this evening, as we turn once again to the Gospel of [Mark], is Jesus' speaking to little children.

Turn with me, then, to the Gospel of Mark, chapter ten, and we pick up the reading at the thirteenth verse. Now, before we read the passage and before we pray, even, it occurs to me that I should welcome some folks who are visiting here because of Twin Lakes. Twin Lakes Fellowship meets tomorrow, Tuesday, and Wednesday; and we have with us this evening, I see, a number of folk who have come in early, and for that. I won't begin to mention names because I'll miss somebody else and get it horribly wrong—but, welcome! Welcome to First Presbyterian Church.

Now let's come before God in prayer.

Our Father, earlier on this evening we were hearing from our brother and friend, David Bergmark, of how small a work it is indeed in Sweden, and yet it is Your work, and we covet Your rich blessing upon that work of the kingdom in that land. We thank You for David, for the trophy of grace that you snatched like a brand from the burning, even from the pews of this particular church. We thank You for Your grace and mercy to us now as we turn to the Scriptures together. We thank You for this inestimable gift that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Help us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest; and grant that by the illumination of the Spirit that we might discern its truth and walk accordingly, for the glory and praise of our great God. Hear us, Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Mark, chapter ten, and verses thirteen through sixteen:

And there were bringing children to Him, so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant

and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all." And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands upon them.

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

This passage, this beautiful, glorious passage that's before us this evening is in all three of the so-called synoptic gospels, in Mark and Matthew and Luke, and it may come as a surprise to you—surprise, that is, because on the surface at least, its meaning seems to be self-apparent; but this is a passage that has in the history of interpretation been the cause of at least two fairly substantial misunderstandings.

It has, of course, been the source and continues to be the source of some in-house brotherly disagreement between Presbyterians, on the one hand, and Baptist and Reformed Baptist interpreters on this passage on the other.

I was reading again a sermon that I read, many, many years ago now, by Charles Haddon Spurgeon, perhaps the greatest preacher—at least, one of the greatest preachers—of the late nineteenth century in the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London: Spurgeon's very famous sermon, preached in the summer of 1864, entitled *Children Brought to Christ and Not to the Font*. And his first point...and I'll read it just for your amusement and delectation...you'd just love to have been there to have heard this sermon! His first point was this: "This text has not the shadow of the shade of the ghost of a connection with baptism."

Well, you certainly knew where Spurgeon stood in relation to this passage! I'm going to disagree with my friend Spurgeon, and we'll talk about it in heaven, I'm sure, and then we'll both know which one of us is right! But I do believe it has something to say by way of inference, but we'll come to that in a minute.

And then again, there is this seeming allusion in this passage that we're to become like children. Brad prayed, I noticed, in his prayer—he didn't explain what it was that he meant by it, but he prayed that we would become like children. What exactly does Jesus mean, and what did Brad mean, when he said that we should become like children? And again, that's been the source and continues to be the source of some debate and some discussion.

What is without any controversy at all is that this passage has something wonderful to say about Jesus. And before we look at the controversial section of it, let's not miss this. This is a passage that teaches us something glorious about Jesus—about who Jesus was, but about what kind of person Jesus is. I want us to see two things.

I want us to see, first of all, what does this passage then teach us about Jesus Christ. What does this passage teach us about Jesus Christ? And then, in the second place, I want us to see what does this passage teach us about the nature of the kingdom of God.

I. What does this passage teach us about Jesus?

What does this passage teach us about Jesus? It self-evidently teaches us something about Jesus. I want to begin there. Now, here's the scene: it isn't exactly clear where this is taking place, and it isn't exactly clear who it is in precise detail that is coming to Jesus, but we know that they were children, and presumably they're being brought by their parents (although the text doesn't actually say that). There's a deliberate anonymity here. You think that as you read the passage and Mark doesn't fill in all of the little details that would be of peculiar interest to us.

We want to imagine now what kind of children? How old were these children? Were they walking? Were they infants? Were they suckling children? What exactly is the picture here? And Mark in the first place, before we try and answer that question, and I think we can answer that question to some degree, Mark is giving us a degree of anonymity.

I think Mark is saying to us that these, in their estimation and the estimation of the society of the times, these were not important people. They definitely were not important enough to remember their names, or to describe anything in particular about them. They're not important people in any way. Children were not regarded as important in Jewish society. It was a very different society, I think, from the society in the South, here in Jackson, Mississippi; the society that you and I are familiar with in this particular church, for example. It was a very different society. Children were to be kept as much as possible out of sight, low-key.

When I was growing up, I can't tell you the number of times...a very different society to this one, I have to say...I can't tell you how many times I would have heard the expression, "Children should be seen and not heard." They should be seen and not heard. That was the motto I used to hear a lot when growing up. Our society is very different...very, very different.

In the world, of course, it's a different society from the one that you and I are familiar with. In the world, children are almost abandoned these days. It's not strange these days to discover children who rarely grow up in the context of two parents. Less than half, I think, of the children in the United States grow up in their young lives in the context of two parents.

But that's not the society I'm thinking about. I'm thinking about a church society,

here in First Presbyterian Church, and we tend to do almost the opposite of what this Jewish society was doing. And sometimes I think we tend to give more attention to children, perhaps even to the point sometimes of idolizing our children. Children dominate our thoughts and our actions, and our calendars, and our clocks from morning until night. Many of you are running around all day long doing something for your children. It never stops. From morning, from your first waking thought in the morning until you finally plop down in that bed at night...and then, in the middle of the night, for some of you! If your children are small, especially, it's all about children. It's a very different society here.

Mark doesn't tell us how old these children were. The same word is used in the Gospel of Mark earlier on. For example, in chapter five it's used of a twelve-year old girl. In the previous chapter, in chapter nine, the same word is used of a boy whose condition is described as having continued from childhood, so he's older. But in verse 16 of the passage, we read that Jesus takes these little children into His arms, suggesting at the very least that they're relatively small and relatively young children.

Now, Luke, in the parallel account to this one, is using a different word from the word that Mark is using, and Luke uses a word that in the ESV is translated *infants*, and in the New American it's translated as *babies*. And in the Gospel of Thomas (not that it has any authority whatsoever, except as an interesting source from earliest times of the late first century, perhaps, but it has absolutely no authority other than that), he seems to be telling the same story, and he refers to these children as *suckling children*. They're little children. Let's stay there.

They're little children, and the disciples rebuke them. Now, the text doesn't say whether they rebuke the children, or whether they're rebuking (probably) the parents who are bringing the children. Now, there's an awkwardness about the text, isn't there, in verse 13? "They were bringing children...they kept on bringing the children"; the sense seems to be that the parents kept on and on doing this, and that the disciples kept on and on rebuking them, but the parents were persistent about trying to bring their children to Jesus, and the disciples were equally persistent in trying to prevent them from doing so. There was a determined effort, and the disciples are reflecting the views of their society in which they find themselves. Children are not the kind of folk Jesus should be bothered with. They should not be bothering Jesus with their little children. Whatever place children have, it's not to be interfering in the more important work of Jesus.

You know, unlike politicians of today, of course, who want to be seen kissing babies for other reasons, these disciples are saying, "No way is Jesus going to be seen photographed kissing babies! Babies and Jesus, they just don't go together. Jesus' work is much more important than to have little children interfering, interrupting, bringing things down to a level that in some way would demean the grandeur and the importance of Jesus."

And maybe as you begin to reflect on the disciples saying something like that, it's not Jesus' importance that's uppermost in their minds: perhaps it's their own importance. You remember the question that they've just been asking Jesus: "Which one of us will be the greatest in the kingdom of God?" John and his brother are going to ask a similar question before this chapter is out: whether they can sit, one on the left hand and one on the right hand of Jesus when He comes in His kingdom. They're concerned about their own importance, and their position in the kingdom of God; and in the advancement of their cause in the kingdom of God, children are going to be in the way.

But Jesus turns our expectations upside down, and what emerges here is a picture of Jesus. It's a wonderful picture of Jesus. It's an astonishing picture of Jesus. It's a beautiful picture of Jesus, because everything that Jesus did in His incarnate life as the Servant of the Lord, everything that He did was reflective of the person of Jesus Christ. Everything that He did, every word He uttered, every action that He engaged in, every emotion that He expressed was indicative of His person. What kind of person is Jesus, the God-man?

You know, one of the questions, isn't it, that little children ask—it's a very difficult question—who is God? Or perhaps a simpler one, because that's a very difficult question to answer (in fact, it's an impossible question to answer)—but, "What is God like? What is God like?" And you put your hand up, and you say, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."

And actually, there's another answer you can give, because Jesus is like this. God is like this. God is like Jesus, who has time for little children. That's what He's like. What is God like? And the picture that is given to us here is God—the infinite God, the eternal God, the creator of all the ends of the earth, this only God there is: Father, Son and Holy Spirit—this God of whom Jesus is reflective has time for little children, will take little children onto His knees and bless them.

Notice two things about Jesus here in this passage. First of all, He's indignant with His disciples. (Verse 14.) He's indignant with His disciples. Now, His disciples are equally indignant with the children, and they are rebuking the children; but Jesus, seeing what the disciples are doing to the children and saying to the parents of the children, no doubt, He was indignant. It's a very strong word. It's a very strong word. A similar emotion (a different word, but a similar emotion) has been expressed back in chapter three and verse five, and there, you remember, it was in a synagogue. And a man had entered the synagogue with withered hand on the Lord's Day, and the folk in the synagogue are looking to see whether Jesus will heal this man on the Sabbath Day. And what Jesus sees is the hardness of their hearts, and He was looking at them, it says, with anger...with anger.

This word is used of others in the Gospels. It's used in Matthew 21 of the chief priest. The chief priest—one day children, shouting in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” And they are indignant. Who are these children? Who let these children into the temple? And to be behaving like this! And they're indignant. It's a sinful indignance. It's a sinful reaction, a sinful emotion.

In Matthew 26, it's at the house of Simon the leper; and you remember a woman has poured oil on Jesus' head from an alabaster box, and the disciples are indignant again—a waste of money! Now, in both of those cases that expression of being indignant is a sinful expression, but that's never going to be true of Jesus, of course.

You can be angry and not sin. Isn't that what Paul says in Ephesians? “Be angry and sin not.” Be angry and sin not. There's a righteous anger. There's an anger that is reflective of the holy character of God. This isn't impatience. This isn't irritability on Jesus' part. This is not a sign of some kind of unforgiving spirit or intolerance on Jesus' part. This isn't because His ego or His pride has been piqued in some way. No, this is righteous indignation. The disciples are being motivated by possibly their own grandiose opinions of themselves, and they are hindering little children from coming to Jesus. And Jesus is indignant with them. He is righteously angry with them.

I wonder...I wonder if you find that over the top. Couldn't Jesus have said to the disciples, you know, ‘It's all right, guys. I'll deal with all this,’ in a kind of gentle, hushed tone? I wonder...does it bother you tonight that Jesus expresses this anger, this righteous anger? That there are things—attitudes of ours—there are attitudes of ours towards others, towards others who would come to Jesus if it wasn't for our attitudes. And Jesus is indignant with that! He's angry with that! And that should disturb us. That should disturb us greatly, that our attitude should cause the heart of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, to be indignant because we are hindering others from coming to Him.

But notice in the second place another thing that's true about Jesus, and that's the obvious thing: He has time for children. He has time for children.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said in a very wonderful book...it's for preachers, of course...it's a book about preaching, and it's a sort of life-long memory of all the “do's and don'ts” and things that he's learned, and things that he wants to pass on to another generation about preaching. It's a wonderfully informative book. There were lectures that he gave at Westminster Seminary, I think, back in the 1960's. And he says...somewhere in that book he says that one of the most extraordinary and greatest of compliments that he was ever given was from a twelve year old child who wrote to him saying (because Dr. Lloyd-Jones had been ill for a number of weeks and hadn't been able to preach)—this little girl twelve years of age had written to him and said to him, wishing him Godspeed that he would recover from his illness because—and these were her words—“you

are the only preacher we can understand.” You are the only preacher we can understand. And he says in that book—you know, Dr. Lloyd-Jones (at least for me, anyway) is one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century—he says, “That was the greatest compliment that I was ever paid.”

Jesus has time for children. Isn't that in itself the most astonishing thing? It's difficult, isn't it? It's difficult not to get sentimental here. You know the picture of Jesus...and He's sitting down, perhaps on a stool of some kind, and He's got two or three children now, on His knees, and He's holding them. And you know, you try and imagine the size of these little children. And little children are always going to be awkward, and they ask the questions at the wrong time, and the wrong sorts of questions, and in the middle of this profound thought that Jesus is giving to these little children—you know...one of the little boys pokes Him in the nose and says, 'What's that?' And Jesus says, you know, 'It's My nose.' And that's the picture that we're being given.

It's hard not to be sentimental. He took them in His arms. He lifts these children and draws them to Himself physically. The tenderness of it; the fatherliness of it; the compassion of it...in all likelihood, these are little children, small children. And here is Jesus, and He has time for them. He has time for them. He stops everything. All the important work that He's supposedly doing in the eyes and thoughts and imaginations and esteem of His disciples, and He says, “This is my work.”

It's not all of His work. Now, don't bend this passage out of shape. It's not all of His work. It's not all about children. You know, you take a passage like this and say that all of our work should be focused on children. Well, that's not true. That's not true of Jesus' ministry. Most of Jesus' ministry wasn't to children, it was to adults. Most of the time, He's talking to the disciples, and there are things that He's saying to the disciples that would not have been appropriate in that form to children; so, we can't take this passage and then make it the be-all and end-all of all ministry and all worship, and all church and everything else.

But it is saying to us that there is a place in the kingdom of God and in the worship of God's people, and in the life and activities that surround the kingdom for children. Children are something that Jesus is saying, 'I love.' He has time for children.

I love it—the children's address in the Sunday evening worship. I think we can justify that. It's not that the whole service becomes for children; it's not that every word and syllable and sentence ought to be at the level that a three or four year old child can understand. No, that would be bending the passage completely out of shape. But there's a point in the service at which we direct our attention and thoughts to the little children. We give thanks to God for the little children. We bless Him for His covenantal faithfulness.

We love it when we hear the little children recite their *Catechism*, and they talk about, of all things, the covenant of works, which even the seminary students here would have difficulty trying to define! It's wonderful! And who knows, in the providence of Almighty God that ten years, fifteen years, twenty, thirty, forty years from now, these words that Grant was teaching these children this evening will come back to them by the power of the Spirit and remind them that by their own efforts and doings they can never enter the kingdom of God, and Somebody else, a substitute, must obey all the terms of the covenant of works in our room and in our stead.

We have a glimpse into the heart of Jesus. We have a glimpse into the heart not just of Jesus, but of God. This is what God is like. This is what God is like. God can take little children into His arms—that's what the picture is saying—because there is no un-Christ-like-ness in God. God is like Jesus, because Jesus is God. This is the kind of God that we have: a God who has time for small little children, with all of their foibles and all of their sentimentality, and all the things that move us and that we respond to...and think about it! Think about it! You know, God has time for you! And me! Because in His eyes we are children, too.

Do you think if God were to begin to speak in His own “language”, if I can put it like that, that you and I would understand what it is He's saying? No! He accommodates Himself; He bends down and whispers in our ear in baby talk, because that's what the Bible is. You know, it stretches us from time to time, of course it does...but you know at the end of the day it's just baby talk. Because the infinite God is coming down to our level, and He's speaking to us in terms that you and I can understand. That's what God is like. That's what God is like.

II. What does this passage teach us about the kingdom?

If it teaches us something about Jesus, it also teaches us something about the kingdom. Now twice in this passage Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, in verses 14 and 15, showing us that this is indeed what this passage is essentially about. It's about the kingdom of God, and it's saying to us that the kingdom belongs to children. The kingdom belongs to children.

“The kingdom belongs so such as these,” He says in verse 14. “Such as these” belong to the kingdom. There are several things here.

It's saying that children can be saved and redeemed. That's true. That statement is true. Children can be saved, yes, they can. They can be forgiven. They can have new hearts. They can come to Jesus Christ and become a new creation in Jesus Christ. Infants can. Unborn children can, in their mother's womb. God the Holy Spirit can come and take away the stony heart and give a heart of flesh, a heart of grace. They may be saved and be totally unconscious of it. That's possible. That is true. It's not the truth that's being taught here, but that is true,

and I want to say that.

Now, this church may introduce some arbitrary age under which the benefits of the outward means of grace—communicant membership, that is to say—that is, in the body of Christ with all of its attendant rites and so on are not allowed underneath that certain age. The church does that. It has to do that for a sense of decency and order. It's not the church...the church isn't saying...the Session of First Presbyterian Church isn't saying that you can't be saved under twelve years of age. It's not saying that.

Nor is it saying that at twelve years of age every child will be saved, and that's important to say, too. No, it's for decency; it's for good order. It's out of a sense of the propriety of good order, and a view that we shouldn't rush, for example, into partaking of the Lord's Table. But children can be saved and redeemed.

But that's not what this passage is actually teaching. 'All of these children you have brought to me today...'...is Jesus saying this?... 'All of the children you have brought to Me today are in union with Me, and because they are in union with Me, they belong to the kingdom, and it's therefore appropriate that you should bring them to Me today.' Is Jesus saying that? Is Jesus saying all of these children are saved? We're saying it's possible for a child to be saved; it's possible for an infant to be saved. But is this passage saying that all of these children are saved? All of these children are redeemed? All of these children that came to Jesus had new hearts?

No. It's not saying any such thing.

What it's saying is that they belong to the kingdom of God. They belong to the kingdom of God. They belong to that domain where the rule and authority and sovereignty of God in its administration operates.

'These children belong to the kingdom of God because all children belong to the kingdom of God.' Is that what Jesus is saying? You know—these children belong to the kingdom of God because, well, all children belong to the kingdom of God. Is that what Jesus is saying?

No, He's not saying that either. He's speaking to a specific group of children: children who are being brought by their parents to Him for blessing, and it's of these children that He says that they belong to the kingdom of God.

Do you see the attitude of these children? Do you notice how humble they are? Do you notice how submissive they are? Well, that's what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying all children—and for that matter, adults who have that kind of humility—belong to the kingdom of God. No, that's not what Jesus is saying here either.

Now, it is true in verse 15 that Jesus does seem to draw some character trait and

apply it to the disciples as though He's saying, "be like that." We'll have to wait until we get to verse 15 to see exactly what it is that Jesus is saying there.

What He's saying in verse 14 is this: "Let the children come to Me. Do not hinder them, for to such as these belongs the kingdom of God." To such as these: this group, this class of individuals: little children who are being brought by parents who desire the blessing of Jesus, who believe that in bringing them to Jesus they will receive a blessing. Professing, believing parents, that is; parents who are bringing their children with the specific aim that Jesus would bestow His blessing upon them; and to that class of infants, to that group, Jesus is addressing these words, and He's saying they belong to the kingdom of God. They belong to that domain where the blessings of God can be found. That's what He's saying.

And this isn't the text on which we build the entire superstructure of infant baptism—no, of course not. But it's one of them. It's one of the foundation stones upon which we see the logic of infant—paedobaptism: that the children of believing parents are to be brought to the place where the blessings of Jesus can be found. They belong to the kingdom of God.

And what kind of kingdom is that? A kingdom where they're prayed for; a kingdom, a sphere, in which they will hear the word of God being read and preached and proclaimed. We baptize the children of believing parents, parents who do exactly what these parents are doing: bringing their children to Jesus for blessing, because the children are members of the kingdom of God. It isn't saying anything about whether the children are regenerate or not. It's not saying anything about whether they're presumed to be regenerate, or presumed to be elect. No. They simple are the children of believing parents, and because of that they are baptized. That's the logic.

This passage, it seems to me, leads in that direction. In the providence of God they are children of parents who believe that bringing their children to Jesus will be an act of blessing, an act of extraordinary blessing; so that whether you're a paedobaptist, or for that matter, a Baptist this evening, you will agree with me that within the confines of the visible church children have extraordinary blessings: of parents who believe in Jesus and who love them; of a fellowship of the communion of saints who regularly pray for the little children (and we saw the fruit of that this morning as some of those children came into communicant membership in the church...and what a blessing that is, to see the prayers of God's people within the kingdom of God being answered).

But the passage is saying something more than that. It's saying that membership in the kingdom is all about grace. Membership in the kingdom is all about grace. In verse 15, He says to the disciples, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

Now, what is Jesus saying? Is He really saying...is He really saying, you know,

'You've got to be humble, like a child'? I've never met a child that's humble! I'm sorry...I've never met a child that's humble. Children assert their rights. You don't teach children to say "me" or "mine." If Jesus were saying you've got to be humble like these little children to enter the kingdom of God, wouldn't Jesus be saying that there is something after all that we can do, that there is something after all that we can present and say to God, 'Lord, look at my humility, and my humility deserves Your blessing'? Jesus is saying no such thing.

The clue is in the text: "They were bringing children to Him." The children weren't doing anything. They were passive. They were being brought. They were being brought! And Jesus is saying to the disciples the only way that you will enter the kingdom of God is that My Father in heaven brings you into that kingdom. The only way into the kingdom of God is "Nothing in my hands I bring..."

Nothing in my hands I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling.
Naked, look to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace.
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

And Jesus is saying to you and to me tonight, unless we come like that...like that: as a helpless little child with nothing to contribute but empty hands...we can't enter the kingdom of God.

And He's saying in reverse, you know...if you come like that, if you're not a believer tonight, if you're not a Christian, if you don't know the forgiveness of your sins, then come like that: like a little helpless child. And Jesus is saying, "I will not cast you out. I will not cast you out."

May God bless His word to us, for His name's sake. Amen. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, as we bring this Lord's Day to a close we ask for Your blessing, the kind of blessing that You bestowed upon these children: words of benediction and promise, and prayer and comfort and assurance that in You and in union with You, and in faith in You, You will never leave us nor forsake us. Grant that we might be surrounded now by the assurance of covenantal love, now and forever. And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the web page. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template. Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any error to be with the transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permissions information, please visit the FPC Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).