

Welcome to those joining us from Crossroads and Highland Park and the 01.

I read a story this week about a guy who, not long after he became a Christian, was working at a Marriott hotel, he was hoping to go into ministry one day, and his job was to shuttle people back and forth from the airport and he's walking through the lobby, looks into the restaurant and recognizes someone eating breakfast there. And he thinks to himself: man that guy looks a lot like Billy Graham. So he looks a little bit closer, and he's like: sure enough. He's wearing a Minnesota Twins baseball cap, and he thinks, well yeah, he's a man of faith, that's someone that would root for the Twins (I really wish it was a Cubs hat, that would have been better), but he just can't help himself because I mean, this is Billy Graham, when are you going to get another chance to meet him, so he goes up to him and says, Excuse me sir are you Billy Graham? And he says in that unmistakable Billy Graham voice: yes. And he says he wants to be a pastor and thanks him for his ministry and Billy just sits and chats with him for 15 minutes or so. Very kind, cordial. And he walks away on cloud 9. Just thinking: man, what a moment.

The only problem was that other people who had probably noticed it was Billy Graham but who didn't want to disturb him, now that that ice had been broken, they too went up to him and said: I'm so sorry, but I just had to say hi, and apparently, they couldn't miss the chance to bring their children to have Billy Graham bless them. And so he said all of a sudden it was like Santa at the mall. Children are climbing up into Billy Graham's lap, he's holding babies, praying for them, talking to people. People from the staff are noticing and talking to him. He was probably there for an hour talking to people.

And the observation of the person who told the story was: Billy was a little bit like Jesus that day. His care for people, his willingness to sit and talk and not be bothered by children coming up into his lap, it was a picture of what we see here in our passage in Luke 18. So let me read it for us very quickly again, because it's short. Here it is:

*15 People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. 16 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. 17 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."*

This morning, there are two pretty simple things that our passage is going to teach us: Jesus wants us to like children, and Jesus wants us to be like children. Doesn't get much easier than that, does it?

It's a familiar passage to many of you, if you have spent any time in our children's ministry, called Lighthouse, this is an important verse for them. I'll come back to that in a bit.

We need to understand this passage in context first and foremost. Our passage last week was all about the contrast between someone (on one hand) who is proud of his accomplishments, and who looks down on this sinner (on the other hand) who admits his need and feels terrible for his sin. Jesus commends the humble one, the one who knows he's a sinner, and rebukes the proud one. And here we have this story, where this juxtaposition is there in a similar way. But there's a different point.

The custom that's probably being referred to is something that would have happened on the evening of the Day of Atonement, when parents would bring children to the elders or scribes for a prayer of blessing. And the passage uses the word for infants or babies, and is probably best translated "they were bringing even infants to him." The idea is that Luke is stressing that they were bringing even their little ones out for Jesus to bless.

Now I think we're so used to this concept of parents bringing their children to church or wanting to get a blessing for them that we miss how revolutionary it would have been for Jesus to have this response. Today, and in our culture, children are generally seen as a gift, as a blessing. They are to be celebrated, and a welcome part of the family.

That's not entirely the case in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. Children were considered lowly because they couldn't contribute to the family in any way. They were just another mouth to feed. They couldn't help to plow a farm or build a barn—they just lie around and are demanding all day. The only thing they *produce* is something that doesn't end up being terribly useful.

Thankfully today, we don't have that view. Not always, not in every culture. There are still children who are enslaved in any number of ways: indentured servants working in a factory, or a sweat shop, or sex slaves. There is still work to do in our world, that is for sure. But certainly in our country, children are generally seen as a blessing.

## PENDULUM SWING

In fact, what's interesting about *our* culture is that in some cases, not only have we cared for our children but we've placed the children at the center of our lives and sort of let them run the show. "What does baby want?" we ask. And whatever baby wants is what baby gets. The pendulum has swung back the other way so much that we can put them in front of everything. That's not helpful either.

I want you to understand, though, that the point of this interaction was not so that Jesus could talk about how wonderful children are.

Jesus isn't trying to be sentimental about children. He didn't think that the little dears were perfect in every way. He knows that they can be precious little angels and they can be obnoxious little brats too. One of the least preached passages in the book of Luke is a passage I preached a couple of years ago, it's known informally as the parable of the brats.

Back in Luke 7, Jesus compares the people of his generation to children, not sweetly singing wonderful adorable songs to each other, but rather this song that they would have taunted each other with:

*31 Jesus went on to say, "To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other:*

*"We played the pipe for you,  
and you did not dance;  
we sang a dirge,  
and you did not cry."*

What does he mean? That children can be fickle and demanding. They can be brats. He knows this about children. And let's be honest, they can be. Jesus is not so much telling us that children are perfect—he's saying that the people that others may see as worthless, or useless are anything but that. They are worth something.

Jesus does this all the time.

He says to the religious folks: hey, see those sinners over there. Yeah, they're getting into heaven before you.

You see that leper, the one that no one wants to have anything to do with? I am going to touch him and make him clean.

Hey, disciples, see that sinful woman over there at the well, the one that you couldn't believe I would even be talking to, yeah: she's my disciple now.

And remember, in the passage just before this one, Jesus tells a story praising the humble and the lowly, and rebuking the proud, and not 10 minutes later, they're shooing the worthless children away. Jesus had to be thinking: do you listen to *anything* I say?

I'd like to give the disciples the benefit of the doubt.

At best, they were trying to protect Jesus. He's busy, people are constantly asking him for things, and so perhaps they were just trying to help him out. Please leave Mr. Jesus alone, guys.

At worst, they were displaying this common understanding of children. They're not important or valuable.

So Jesus says: wait, what are my disciples doing now? Guys, stop it, bring em here, yes, the smelly babies, bring em over. What's wrong with you? Don't stop the children from coming to me. I love what you think is useless. I don't love people because of what they can do, I love them because of who they are.

#### TEENAGERS THE NEW BABIES

[Now, I'm going to pause here and comment on something that I see in my context. I actually think that babies were considered sort of useless 2,000 years ago, and I wonder if maybe teenagers are more in that category now.

So I've been doing youth ministry for a while, and really any time anything breaks in the church, who gets blamed? Teenagers. Well for my first 3 or 4 years, it was just me that got blamed, but then it was teenagers. It's like the expectation for them is that they will cause problems. That's just sort of what they do. And they're not really good for anything till they're out of high school and out of college.

Can you see it? Jesus is coming through, and these parents with teenagers are like: "Uh, Jesus, help. We don't know what happened. We had some cute, sweet little children for a while and now they've become little monsters. Can you please help us?" And they try to bring their teenagers to Jesus and the disciples go: teenagers? Please don't waste his time.

It's not in the text of course, but I just wonder if this would be his message: whatever you think society would reject, especially young people, bring them to me. I love them.]

So the first thing Jesus wants us to see here is that Jesus loves children and he wants us to love them too. Well there are lots of ways to apply this point, but let me just put in here a shameless plug for the possibility for each of you to be involved in shaping the lives of young people. If you're a parent, the easiest thing you can do is bring them to Lighthouse or to a family event like the dinner theater happening at Crossroads this weekend. Bring them to Cove, to SHYG, get them involved in the things we offer here. I have seen how powerful these ministries can be in shaping the lives of young people.

Beyond that, I want to challenge you to think about getting involved as a **leader** in one of these ministries.

It doesn't matter if you're a parent or not, you can do it. Lighthouse, Cove, SHYG, every one of those ministries relies on the hearts of adults who say: I want to reflect the heart of Jesus and love young people.

Jesus wasn't their parent. You don't have to be their parent either.

People have said it takes a village to raise a child, and it take a whole church to disciple a child. We all have a part to play in this.

#### WRAP POINT ONE

So all of that is point number one: Jesus wants us to like children, to care about them the way he does. Not necessarily because they're *children*, but because they're his.

#### POINT TWO

But all of that is really just a set-up for Jesus' 2<sup>nd</sup> point from this passage, which I would argue is actually more crucial which is that Jesus wants us to be *like* children.

So you can just imagine the scene. He's just stopped his disciples from turning away these moms, and he says; hey get over here. Let me see that baby. And so he's holding this baby, who maybe just looks back at him. And the thought occurs to him: you know that kingdom of God thing that I've been talking to you about. There's really only one way to receive it. You know this kid that you don't want to have anything to do with? Yeah, that's the one you need to learn something from, the one you need to imitate.

They must be so confused. Again. Because Jesus always tends to find the unexpected to teach us.

And the language Jesus uses here is not just a suggestion. Not just an idea about entering the kingdom. He doesn't say: you know, one way you could enter the kingdom of God is by becoming like a little child. No he actually *denies* entry to anyone who is not prepared to enter it like a little child. There is only one way into the kingdom, yes it's through me, but it's only if you will receive it like a child. And variations on this appear in Matthew, Mark, and Luke so it's not like Luke was just sort of out on his own here. It's a common theme.

Each person that enters the kingdom of God does so only because they have become like a little child. I mentioned Billy Graham earlier in the sermon. He's 97 years old. He's one of the most famous Christians who's ever lived, been a Christ follower for over 80 years now. He will likely enter into glory soon. When he does, it will not be because he led millions of people to Christ. It will not be because he lived a life of integrity, was faithful to his wife, kept his finances above reproach, or any of that. It will be because he became like a little child and received the kingdom.

So what might Jesus mean when he says we have to be like a little child to enter the kingdom? In what ways should we learn from children about Jesus? Well as I've reflected on it, I think that there are at least 3 ways that the heart of a child is what we need to enter the kingdom. Children are trusting, dependent, and full of wonder.

## TRUSTING

First of all, children are trusting.

This is where the phrase "stranger danger" has come from: because children by their very nature trust people. The older we get, the less we trust. We grow hardened. We grow skeptical, walls go up. But that's not what life in the kingdom of God is like. Jesus says that the meek will inherit the earth, not the skeptical. Who are meek? Children are meek.

Kids trust. They believe stuff. It's why it's so easy to lie to them as parents. I remember this one video that I saw years ago, couldn't find it on YouTube when I looked, but it was some sort of candid camera thing where they put a speaker on a dog and there was a hidden camera and the dog started talking to the child. And the way the children responded, these were like 3 year olds, they weren't even amazed that the dog was talking. They just responded. They were like yeah it's about time you finally started talking like you do on

the TV shows. They just sort of trusted that this is what was happening, it wasn't even a big deal.

Have you ever seen a kid at the park? They go up to other kids they don't know. "Hey do you want to play?" Or even better: "Do you want to be my friend?" How awesome is that? So totally trusting.

[Can you imagine if an adult did that at the gym?]

Or I remember when my kids were younger, they would stand at the top of the stairs, and if I went to grab them, they would just fall. There was never a thought in their mind—what if he doesn't catch me? I'm gonna get a faceful of stairs. No, they just trust. They fall.

Similar to trusting is the lack of worrying that children do. And I'm talking here about young children. They don't worry about stuff, generally speaking. They're not fretting over bills to pay or who likes them or what the future holds. They just exist with this simple trust.

That's what the kingdom is for—people who will trust. So we need to have a heart that's trusting.

#### DEPENDENT

Secondly, children are dependent. Especially when you imagine Jesus holding a baby. Babies are completely dependent. Their very existence is in the hands of their parents.

I imagine Jesus holding this completely helpless baby and going: yeah, it's kinda like that.

This is not what we get praised for in our world today.

No one ever says that they succeeded in life by depending on someone else; people are praised for their ability to work independently.

No one says to their spouse: hey, be as needy as you possibly can be, OK?

In fact, we want to be the giver, not the receiver. Frederick Buechner says "It's not only more blessed to give than to receive...it's also a whole lot easier."

Why is that? Because the giver has the power; the receiver has no power.

Beyond just receiving from God, we are pretty bad at receiving gifts in general. We say things like "Oh, you shouldn't have done that." When we're praised, all we can do is deflect it, talk about what we did wrong. "Oh it wasn't a big deal" or "I messed up that one part." We don't know how to

receive because receiving a gift in many ways requires us to become humble.

That's why you sometimes find people fighting over who pays the bill at a restaurant because the one that pays has the power. The one who receives is forced into humility.

If you've ever lost a job, or had to turn to people for help. It's hard, it's humbling.

Dependence is weakness; self-sufficiency is to be desired above all else. For goodness' sake, what was the name of the document that founded our country: Declaration of Independence. Don't need you, England, get outta here.

There's nothing wrong with this in many instances—our goal as parents is for our children to be financially and otherwise independent from us once they graduate from college.

And there is an unhealthy kind of dependence we want to avoid in our relationships with others. I'm really talking about a dependence on God. And that's hard to do.

In our own lives, our pride steps up in most circumstances and says: I got this. I can handle this completely. Don't worry, I'm good. But Jesus says: I'd like to see you like that little baby, who relies on his mom for absolutely everything. A baby will die unless it someone else cares for it. I want you like that, Jesus says. Be like that with me. Depend on me.

Dependence is hard for adults. We like to be in control. Jesus says: I need you dependent. I need you helpless and completely dependent on me. That's how you enter the kingdom.

#### FULL OF WONDER

And finally, the last thing that we find in children is that they're full of wonder. I think the lack of wonder thing in our culture is one of the most annoying things. Are you familiar with the phrase "Meh"? It's got a close counterpart. "Whatever."

I wish that word didn't exist. "Whatever." Little children don't say that. They don't have that attitude. They think things are amazing.

#### HOME MOVIE

Something we enjoy doing in our house is watching old home movies, and it's of course a joy to watch your kids when they were younger for lots of reasons but it's amazing to see them respond with wonder.

If you're like us, you get the video camera out for Christmas and birthdays and not much else, unfortunately, but little kids at Christmas are just the best. The older they get, the more you have to impress them. But there's this one Christmas where Kaila was probably 5 years old, and we got her something very simple. And she responds over and over with "It's what I always wanted." She's just jumping and skipping all over the house saying it over and over again: "It's what I always wanted." It wasn't what she always wanted but she was ready to embrace the wonder of it.

#### CELL PHONES

One side note I'll add to that is that it's hard to be full of wonder when we're staring at our cell phones. We miss things when we're on our phones. Life is happening all around us and we miss it. They have their place of course, not down on technology at all, and I am preaching to myself here on this one, but there's often not a lot of wonder on these, and there is out there.

Margaret Feinberg wrote a book about this, called *Wonderstruck*, and she says this:

"Many of us say we want to experience God, but we don't look for his majesty. We travel life's paths with our heads down, focused on the next step with our careers or families or retirement plans. But we don't really expect God to show up with divine wonder. God invites us to look up, open our eyes to the wonder all around us, and seize every opportunity to encounter him."

And to that I would add: that happens when you become like a child again.

#### CHILDISH/CHILDLIKE

This is tricky because growing up is important. God doesn't want us to be childish. The apostle Paul says that when he was a child, he acted like a child but when he grew up he put childish ways behind him. There's a difference between childish (immature, selfish, petty) and being childlike: embracing wonder and a simple trust and dependence on God.

#### MOVIE CLIP

I'm gonna close with a movie clip. So because I have four children and raised them between the years 1998 and now, I have watched a whole lot of Pixar movies. And you would be surprised just how many Pixar movies have something to teach us about life, and how many Biblical principles are either intentionally or unintentionally imbedded into the stories. My children now make fun of me for the analogies I find in the movies. I tried to get my kids to guess which scene from this Pixar movie I was going to use and they had such fun in just thinking of the most cheesy thing they could: oh, this guy is Jesus, right dad?

Anyway, the clip I'm going to show you today is from Ratatouille. It's a movie my kids love. If you haven't seen it, it's about a rat living in Paris who wants to be a chef. And the plot is a little complicated but at the end of the movie, a very famous restaurant critic shows up to review the food at the restaurant where the rat has been helping to prepare the food. They basically have this one shot to stay in business, they have one dish to serve him to impress him. And they decide to serve a dish called Ratatouille. Let's watch what happens.

Watch clip here: <https://youtu.be/kuyUKdJccgM>

Ratatouille is not a gourmet dish. It would be a little like serving mac and cheese. And when the critic hears what it is, he has his pen ready to mock, and to critique.

But something amazing happens. The food transports him back to his childhood. It happens very quickly, and I only noticed it when I watched it very carefully a few times, but he's just fallen off his bike, the tire is bent, and he skinned his knee. When he blinks, a tear falls from his eye. But his mom is there. She's making dinner, and he sits down and serves him this ratatouille.

This meal transports him back home to those feelings of being loved and safe and cared for, the innocence of that.

And he drops his pen. Doesn't need it. Doesn't need to critique anymore. Just wants to eat that delicious food and be a participant in life.

See, children don't critique; they participate.

Children don't evaluate; they just do.

Children live in the moment.

And of course he ends up writing them a glowing review, much to everyone's surprise.

He became like a little child, so he could enjoy the experience of eating a great meal.

God wants us to become like little children too, and be trusting again, be willing to depend on Him like we depended on our parents when we were children. He wants us to be full of wonder. Be willing to be loved by Him, to know the love of our heavenly father who just sits and waits for us to let our walls down, so we can be in His presence.

Let's pray.

Lord for many of us, there may be very good reasons why our hearts have grown hard towards you or towards others. We might have been hurt and so in order to prevent ourselves from more harm, we put up walls. God, by your Holy Spirit, would you rip those walls down? Would you give us back that simple trust in you that we had? Would you show us how you want us to become like little children again, so that we may receive your kingdom?

Amen.