

THE KINGDOM OF INFANTS ONLY

¹⁵ And they brought unto him also infants, that he would touch them: but when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. ¹⁷ Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein (Luke 18.15-17).¹

Sentimentalism dies hard, especially in theology. Rare is the person who actually conforms his feelings and beliefs to Scripture, instead of the other way around. Typically people make a god of feelings, clinging to dogmas they wish to be true simply because they like them. Our culture treasures at least two beliefs relevant to this text: 1) all infants are essentially good, and therefore, 2) all infants are in a state of God's favor. Another way to state these popular notions is that we are born without a corrupt nature and without guilt. The Bible squarely contradicts these sacrosanct heresies. If you feel I am heartless to say that, you are self-condemned as an idolatrous sentimentalist.

“Eisegesis” means reading one’s preconceived notions into a text, and few passages have suffered more abuse from eisegetes than this one. This has been used as an important “proof text” for infant baptism in no less than the Westminster Confession of Faith: “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized” [Cites Luke 18.15-17] (XXVIII.IV). Countless commentators in the Reformed tradition agree, e.g.,:

From this text divines will prove the baptism of children, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven; . . . the argument is well drawn from this text, Those who have a right to a membership in the church are to be baptized; or, Those who have a right to the kingdom of glory may be baptized. But one or both of these are affirmed in this text. . . . The argument for infant baptism from this text is founded upon his words, uttered on this occasion (M. Poole on Matt 19.15).

Notice the total absence of baptism in the biblical text, and of infant church membership, and even of infant salvation. Sadly, the typically-sound Matthew Poole twists the text. Jesus never said the kingdom of heaven belongs *to infants*, but *to those like infants*, metaphorically speaking. There is not a single command or example of infant baptism in the whole Bible. Even some Baptists believe this passage gives us a warrant for a church ceremony of baby dedication, but there is no church in the text, and we do not have Jesus’ physical presence today that we might literally bring our children to Him. Infant baptism and baby dedication are examples of mere sentimentalism. We may and should love our evangelical paedobaptist brethren, but on these things they are sorely mistaken.

Our responsibility as Bible interpreters and teachers is “exegesis,” drawing truths *out of a text* which are already really there, often unnoticed by the casual reader. Godliness requires that we love the Lord our God with all our mind and with all our heart. That means, among other things, that we adore God and submit without reservation to Him. His thoughts and feelings, expressed in His Word, become the measure and molder of our thoughts and feelings. Now let us love God this way in receiving this sermon text just as it stands without adding or subtracting anything, and without twisting it to fit our preconceived extra-biblical notions and sentimental desires.

Clearly, its dominant theme is the relationship of infants and God’s kingdom. Jesus takes a situation with infants and turns it to good use for the souls of His older, responsible hearers. This is the main point.

No one enters the kingdom of God without receiving it like a little child.

THE INFANT CONTROVERSY (18.15)

Perhaps nothing can more quickly and easily rouse us to passion than disagreements about rearing children. We are tender toward them, yet not as much as we should be. In this verse we see infants brought to Jesus, and the act itself criticized by Jesus’ disciples.

Brought to Jesus (15a). First, the who: who “they” are is not stated; presumably they are the respective parents, probably those who believed in Jesus already, for their faith in Him must have motivated their enthusiasm. The Greek for “infants” refers to “a very small child, even one still unborn—‘baby, infant, fetus’” (LN 9.45). This word makes no distinction at birth; biblically, the unborn are considered fully human. Abortion is clearly infanticide.

Second, the why: “that He would touch them” (cf. Matt 19.13, “that He should put His hands on them, and pray”). In the gospels, almost every other mention of Jesus and touch relates to miraculous cures, and so these may

¹ Cf. Matt 19.13-15; Mark 10.13-16.

have been diseased children whose parents hoped for healing (see Luke 4.40). Alternatively, the laying on of hands with prayer had a long Hebrew association with godly men as instruments of blessing (e.g., Gen 48.14-16). In either case, how proper and loving it was for parents to bring their children to Jesus!

We parents ought to do the same thing spiritually today. When our children are sick, let us beg Jesus' healing touch, and as they are sinful, let us plead for Jesus' saving touch! We bring our children to Jesus by imitating Him and preaching Him and His doctrine, whether in private, in family worship, or in church. Let us sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to our infants and little ones and teach them to sing, making them our frequent fellow-worshippers. Let us urge prayer upon them with their earliest utterances, read them Bible stories, and catechize them as early as possible. Let us warn them of judgment for their sins, and assure them that Jesus welcomes and forgives them as they repent and believe in Him. All these things are especially the duties of parents toward their own children, with the church in a supporting role.

But let us not baptize anyone, not even our own beloved children, without a credible profession of faith and a readiness to assume the weighty responsibilities of church membership. In a famous sermon on our text entitled, "Children Brought to Christ, and Not to the Font"² (MTP #581), Spurgeon said,

This text has not the shadow of the shade of the ghost of a connection with baptism. There is no line of connection so substantial as a spider's web between this incident and baptism, or at least my imagination is not vivid enough to conceive one. . . . Truly I might as well prove vaccination from the text before me, as the performance which the Prayer Book calls "infant baptism." I do not hesitate to say that I could prove any earthly thing, if I might but have such reasoning granted to me as that which proved infant baptism from this passage. There is no possible connection between the two. The teaching of the passage is very plain and very clear, and baptism has been imported into it, and not found in it. As a quaint writer has well said, "These doctrines are raised from the text as our collectors raise a tax upon indigent, insolvent people, by coming armed with the law and a constable to take by force that which is not to be had. Certainly never was text so strained and distrained to pay what it never owed; never man so racked to confess what he never thought; never was a pumice stone so squeezed for water which it never held."

Criticized by Jesus' Disciples (15b). Somehow the disciples thought there was something inappropriate about all this, so they rebuked those bringing the infants. Paedobaptists may think they see early Baptists here, assuming that if we will not baptize our little children, we must think it wrong to bring them to Jesus. May it never be! Indeed, in our zeal for having an adult-oriented church ministry, and a membership of only responsible, credible believers, we must beware of becoming like these well-meaning but misguided followers of Jesus. Who knows how young a soul might possibly be saved? Every child is an eternal soul, and none is too young to be an object of our religious care and ministry in one form or another. Let us love them by faithfulness in this, and so comfort our concerned paedobaptist friends with the proof of our love for even the youngest children. And thus may we quell the ecclesiastical controversy, as much as it depends on us.

THE INFANT WELCOME (18.16)

Jesus now confronts His disciples about their error. In Mark 10.14, we read "he was much displeased [moved with indignation, ASV], and said unto them, Suffer . . .," and etc. The disciples had committed a serious breach against the love of God and their fellow human beings. Of all the sins that men may commit, hindering others on their way to Jesus is among the greatest (Matt 23.13; Luke 11.52). Now Jesus "explains his reasoning and thereby transforms the event into a picture of discipleship."³

Welcomed by Jesus (16a). He stresses the point by stating it both positively and negatively: "suffer [allow, let] little children to come unto me, and forbid them not." Jesus' first point is that He accepts even little children as "worthy kingdom candidates."⁴ This was clearly counter-cultural, for back then, children were not much respected or valued. "Children were people of no social status, and the disciples would not want the important time of their rabbi taken up with blessing them."⁵ Bock makes the point well:

While the acceptance of children's spiritual responses is not the passage's explicit intent (these children are brought; they do not come on their own), nonetheless, Jesus' willingness to receive them suggests his

² "A receptacle in a church for the water used in baptism, typically a freestanding stone structure" (NOAD).

³ Bock, in loc.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bible Background Commentary, in loc.

acceptance of them and carries with it implications for children who do show trust and responsiveness to God.⁶

Little child and young person who is hearing me now, let me speak directly to you. Being a Christian is not just for grown-ups. You, too, can and should believe in Jesus and obey Him with all your heart. If you will do this, He will accept you just as you are, and He will be your Savior and friend forever. Do this today, while you are still young, and you will be happier and more blessed than if you wait until you get older to follow Jesus (Eccl 12.1).

Commended by Jesus (16b). Jesus wanted these infants to be brought to Him because they were also an apt illustration of a profound spiritual truth. “For of such is the kingdom of God” (a very good and formal translation; cf. this paraphrase, “because the kingdom of God belongs to people who are like these children,” NCV). Jesus is neither saying God’s kingdom is a literal nursery with only little babies, nor excluding old people from it on account of their age. This saying has nothing to do with how old you are, but rather the state of your heart and realities in the spiritual realm. Jesus is at least saying that “the kingdom belongs to the nobodies, those who do not approach it on the merits of their own status.”⁷ “The use of [the Greek word translated “such as these”] makes the second point: these children are representative and picture something very basic about kingdom members, namely, childlike trust and reliance. Just as a little child depends on its parents, so God’s children depend on their Father.”⁸

THE INFANT REQUIREMENT (18.17)

Now we see how that reading infant baptism into this passage is such a distraction from its main point! This last verse of the three drives that point home most forcefully.

A Trustworthy Edict (17a). “Verily I say to you” is a frequent biblical introductory phrase we are apt to miss and undervalue. “I tell you in solemn truth” (WNT); this is an announcement with divine authority and eternal significance—whatever you do, do not doubt this or miss it! If you remain ignorant or apathetic about this until death, you will regret it forever and ever. The King of kings is speaking, and He heralds a royal edict on the basis of His own authority and His Father’s. Only certain people shall be included in God’s kingdom of grace and glory.

A Total Exclusion (17b). The last line is the solemn point to be made and most pressed. “Whosoever” (an all-inclusive condition; there are no exceptions) “shall not receive” (an act of faith responding to the offer of a free gift) “the kingdom of God” (tantamount to receiving Jesus, the King and Treasure of the kingdom) “as a little child” (with qualities illustrated by such children) “shall in no wise” (an absolute exclusion of those lacking these spiritual traits) “enter therein” (be received into the kingdom and enjoy its privileges and benefits, including reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, communion with Christ, adoption as sons, an eternal inheritance, etc.).

How can I further explain Jesus’ meaning? He is saying that you absolutely must be childlike in some ways to assure yourself that you have been saved and will be saved on Judgment Day. You must receive God’s kingdom **humbly**, as one utterly unworthy of it (remember the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, 18.9-14).

It very fitly follows here after the story of the publican, as a confirmation of the truth which was to be illustrated by that parable, that those shall be accepted with God, and honored, who humble themselves, and for them Christ has blessings in store, the choicest and best of blessings (M. Henry).

You must receive God’s kingdom **trustingly**, like children who believe whatever they are told (Eph 4.14). So you must have an unlimited and implicit trust in Jesus and His Word.

You must receive God’s kingdom **poorly** or empty-handedly, as the next story shows (the rich young ruler, Luke 18.18-23). Children are recognized as dependents in Scripture (2 Cor 12.14), and so are comparable to needy believers.

It pictures faith as the simple, helpless, trusting dependence of those who have no resources of their own. Like children, they have no achievements and no accomplishments to offer or commend themselves with (MacArthur Study Bible on Matt 18.3).

Only people like this are saved. *No one enters the kingdom of God without receiving it like a little child.* That is a message we all need to hear, whether little children or adults. May the Lord work in us these spiritual graces and assure us that we are His spiritual children after all. Amen.

⁶ In loc.

⁷ BBC.

⁸ Bock, in loc.