

“WHO IS INCLUDED IN GOD’S KINGDOM?”

**I. Introduction**

- A. This brief passage that we are considering this morning is sandwiched in between two other passages that deal with the same basic question, the question of who may enter the kingdom of God.
1. In the preceding passage, Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.
  2. Luke introduced that parable by saying that Jesus told it to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.
  3. In the parable, when the Pharisee prayed, he thanked God for what he saw in himself when he evaluated himself in light of what is required in the law.
  4. But when the tax collector prayed, he simply cried out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”
  5. Jesus said that it was the tax collector, rather than the Pharisee, who went down to his house justified.
  6. The tax collector was the one who was received into God’s kingdom, and it was not on the basis of any righteousness that he had in himself.
  7. Instead, he entered the kingdom because he laid hold of God’s gracious provision of forgiveness by faith.
- B. In the passage that follows our text, the question of who may enter the kingdom of God is dealt with in the context of Jesus’s interaction with a rich ruler.

1. A rich man comes to Jesus and asks him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
  2. When Jesus responds by telling the man to keep God's commandments, the man says that he has already done this.
  3. And when Jesus tells him to sell all that he has and give it to the poor, the man becomes sad because he does not want to part with his great wealth.
  4. This then leads Jesus to tell his disciples, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"
- C. This surrounding context helps us understand what is being taught in the text that we are considering today.
1. Luke put the story of Jesus blessing infants in between these two other stories for a reason.
  2. He did it to lay further emphasis on what kind of person can enter the kingdom of God.
  3. By welcoming little children and placing God's blessing upon them, Jesus made it clear that God defines his covenant community as a community that consists of believers and their children.
  4. And Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach that the only people who can gain entrance into God's kingdom are those who acknowledge their spiritual helplessness and their spiritual poverty.

## II. The Error of Excluding Children

- A. Our text begins by telling us about these parents who were bringing their infant children to Jesus to be blessed by him.
1. It was a common practice for first century Jews to bring their children to a rabbi so that he could pray for the children and bless them.

2. The Greek term that the ESV translates as “infants” is indeed a term that refers to babies and children at the earliest stages of development.
  3. This makes it very clear that these children were not coming to Jesus by their own choice.
  4. They were being brought to him by their parents.
  5. These parents wanted Jesus to pronounce God’s blessing on their children.
  6. And this was not a matter of mere sentimentality.
  7. It was reflective of their understanding that their children were marked out by the sign of circumcision as members of the covenant people.
- B. When the disciples saw what was happening, they rebuked the parents for wasting Jesus’s time.
1. They thought that Jesus’s mission was too important to be bothered by something of this nature.
  2. It is not surprising that they would think this way.
  3. Children were not held in high regard in that culture.
  4. The disciples may have assumed that the souls of children are incapable of receiving grace, so that it would be pointless for them to be brought to Jesus.
  5. If that is what they thought, then Jesus’s response makes it clear that they were wrong.
  6. The fact that Jesus invited these parents to bring their infant children to him shows that children are capable of receiving grace.

7. Children need God's grace to be saved every bit as much as adults need it.
8. We are all born in sin, born under God's just condemnation.
9. Children are not innocent, not even when they are babies.
10. Jesus's rebuke of his disciples makes it clear that our Lord cares about the souls of children.
11. They are not unimportant to him.
12. He welcomes them and cares for them as much as he welcomes and cares for grown-ups.

### III. The Importance of Welcoming Children

- A. While speaking of the infants who were being brought to him, Jesus then says this: "to such belongs the kingdom of God."
  1. This explicitly tells us that children are included in the kingdom of God.
  2. The children of believers are counted as members of God's covenant family.
  3. Of course, this does not mean that covenant children are saved by virtue of their birthright.
  4. Salvation only belongs to the elect, and a person's election is manifested by their coming to Christ in faith (except of course when an elect person dies in infancy or is so disabled that he is not capable of making a profession of faith).
  5. Being the child of Christian parents does not guarantee a person's salvation.

6. Nevertheless, the Bible does make it clear that all children born to believers have an acknowledged relationship with the church.
  7. They stand under the government of the church.
  8. They are entitled to receive baptism as the sign of their outward inclusion in the covenant community.
  9. They are owed the prayers, instruction, and admonition of their parents and fellow church members.
  10. And they have the responsibility of laying hold of the benefits of the covenant by making an informed and sincere profession of faith in Christ when they reach an age when they are capable of doing so.
- B. In light of this, it is important for us to take heed of Jesus's warning not to hinder children from coming to him.
1. Of course, Jesus originally said this in the context of this particular situation, but his words still apply to the church today.
  2. There are a number of ways believers can hinder their children from coming to Christ.
  3. We can do so by failing to pray for our children, by failing to instruct them in God's Word, by failing to set a godly example for them, by failing to bring them to worship and teach them the importance of being an active member of Christ's church.
  4. We can hinder our children from coming to Christ by being too severe with them and exasperating them, burdening them with the demands of the law without ever pointing them to the gospel.
  5. Or at the other extreme, we can hinder our children by being too indulgent with them, by failing to discipline them, by shielding them from the consequences of their sinful actions.

6. While we should always show kindness and patience to our children, we should also remember that they need to learn that sin has consequences.
- C. In the parallel to this passage in Matthew's Gospel, we are told that Jesus laid his hands on the children who were brought to him and prayed for them.
1. This is a detail that is worth pondering for a moment.
  2. Jesus certainly would not have done something like this for superstitious or sentimental reasons.
  3. Every prayer that Jesus ever prayed was perfectly sincere and perfectly reverent.
  4. Moreover, Jesus would not have prayed for mere temporal blessings for these children but for spiritual blessings.
  5. He would have prayed for their salvation.
  6. And because Jesus's intercession is effective for his sheep, those among these infants who were of the elect were surely renewed by the Spirit in God's appointed time according to their capacity.
  7. It could be that some of them were born again at that very moment, even though they were mere babies.
  8. There is nothing in Scripture that indicates that children cannot receive the Spirit and be justified from the earliest stages of infancy.
  9. In fact, Luke tells us at the beginning of his Gospel that John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit "even from his mother's womb." (Lk. 1:15)
  10. This tells us that it is possible for a child to be born again before he or she is capable of making a profession of faith.

11. In such cases, the power concealed within the child grows by degrees and becomes fully manifest at the proper time.
  12. This is why it is a mistake to assume that every true Christian needs to be able to identify a distinct conversion experience.
  13. While some have such an experience, many cannot recall a time when they did not trust in Christ.
- D. The welcome that Jesus extended to the infants in this passage is one of the reasons why we believe that it is necessary for the sacrament of baptism to be extended to the children of believers.
1. As the theologian Francis Turretin once explained, “Now if it was right for infants to be brought to Christ, why not also to be received to baptism, the symbol of our communion with Christ? Why should the church not receive into her bosom those whom Christ received into his? How unjust we should be to drive away those whom he willingly received.” [*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3.417]
  2. To deny children the mark of inclusion in the covenant is to deny that they are in the covenant.
  3. But this and many other passages testify that the children of believers are in the covenant.
  4. They are therefore entitled to receive the sign of the covenant.
- E. Now, it should be noted that the same argument does not extend to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper because the Lord’s Supper is different than baptism.
1. Baptism is administered only once because it is a sign and seal of our regeneration and ingrafting into Christ, which is an one-time and unrepeatable event.
  2. But the Lord’s Supper is administered often because it is a sign and seal that represents and exhibits Christ as the source of spiritual nourishment for our souls and so confirms our continuance and

growth in Christ. [see WLC 177]

3. The fact that the Lord's Supper is a sacrament by which faith is nourished and strengthened means that faith needs to be present in order for participants to benefit from this sacrament.
4. And because 1 Corinthians 11:27 issues a serious warning about participating in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, covenant children should only be admitted to the Lord's Table on the basis of an informed and credible profession of faith.

#### **IV. The Necessity of Being Like Children**

- A. This brings us to the final verse in our text, where Jesus makes a broader point by saying, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."
  1. This is a well-known saying, but it has sometimes been misunderstood.
  2. Jesus is certainly not telling us that a person gains entrance into God's kingdom by being childish or immature.
  3. After all, the Scriptures call us to be diligent in striving to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ so that we may be mature in the faith.
  4. Nor is Jesus saying that children are naturally innocent and humble and that we should emulate these qualities.
  5. Both Scripture and experience tell us that children are not innately innocent or humble.
  6. The point that Jesus is making here is that God's kingdom is only open to those who know that they have nothing to offer to God.
  7. Remember the surrounding context.



8. The reason why the Pharisee in the preceding parable remained under God's condemnation was because he trusted in his own righteousness.
  9. And the reason why the rich ruler in the passage that follows did not enter the kingdom was because he thought he could inherit eternal life by what he did.
  10. Both men thought that they were important; both thought that they had something to offer to God; both were wrong.
- B. You cannot enter God's kingdom on the basis of who you are or what you do.
1. You can only enter the kingdom as one who depends entirely on Jesus Christ to do what is needed to secure your salvation.
  2. You have to be as utterly dependent on God as an infant is on his parents.
  3. Infants and young children demonstrate the basic posture of those who enter the kingdom of God.
  4. They are not doers, but receivers.
  5. They receive all that they need from their parents.
  6. They depend on their parents entirely.
  7. And in the same way, those who would enter God's kingdom must depend on God for everything.
  8. Or as Martin Luther memorably put it in a statement that he jotted down shortly before his death, "We are beggars! That is true."