

INTRODUCTION

One of the things I love about the Bible is that it is so full of variety. Last week's passage we were talking about God's definition of marriage, a pretty deep subject. And in the very next passage before us today, we see Jesus loving on little children.

If you've ever been to Disneyland or Disney World you're familiar with the ride and the song, "It's a Small World." However, before it appeared at the Disney parks it first showed up at the 1964 New York World's Fair. The ride was originally called "Children of the World" and when you rode through the exhibit, you heard the national anthems of dozens of countries played at the same time. When Walt first heard that he knew that wouldn't do. So he commissioned the Sherman brothers, Disney writers, to come up with a happy song. The result was, "It's a Small World" and they changed the entire exhibit to fit the song. The song was never copyrighted and Disney claims it has been sung and translated into more languages than any other song. It's somewhat of a brain worm, so you may be humming it the rest of the day, which is better than some things that could be stuck in your brain.

When it comes to God's world, it is a small world. God loves everybody, and especially small children. Children have always been interested in God. One Christian schoolteacher asked her young students to write some letters to God. I hope they make you smile.

Dear God, Thank for you're the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy. —Joyce

Dear God, If you give me a genie lamp like Aladdin I will give you anything you want except my money or my chess set. —Raphael

Dear God, I want to be just like my Daddy when I get big but not with so much hair all over. —Sam

Dear God, I do not think anybody could be a better God. Well I just want you to know but I am not just saying that because you are God. —Charles

Dear God-Please put another Holiday between Christmas and Easter. There is nothing good in there now. —Ginny

We read Thos. Edison made light. But in Sun. School they that said you did it. So I bet he stoled your idea. —Donna

One of the most beautiful pictures in the New Testament is where Jesus takes little children in His arms and blesses them.

Mark 10:13-16. "People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, '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.' And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them."

Parents are supposed to teach kids, but kids teach their parents a lot too. I read a blog by young mother who wrote about the things her son taught her. "I've learned that you shouldn't toss baseballs up inside when the ceiling fan is on. I've learned that the doubled-pained glass in the window will not stop a baseball that was hit by a ceiling fan. I've learned that the motor on the ceiling fan isn't strong enough to rotate a 42-pound boy wearing a superman cape, hanging by a dog leash. I've learned that when you hear the toilet flush, followed by the words, 'uh oh' it's already too late. My son has taught me that the spin cycle on a washing machine can make a cat very dizzy. I also learned that a dizzy cat can throw up two or three times its body weight. Mostly my son has taught me that you can only survive parenthood with a sense of humor."

As we study this touching scene where Jesus welcomes little children into his arms, I'd like to make four observations about children.

1. IT'S GOOD FOR PARENTS TO BRING THEIR CHILDREN TO JESUS

We read, "People were bringing little children to Jesus." (Mark 10:13) These people who were bringing their kids to Jesus aren't identified, but we may assume they were parents and grandparents.

It's fun to bring your kids and grandkids to Jesus. A grandmother recently told me she was really excited that she was keeping all three of her young grandkids for the next week. She was so grateful she put an additional \$50 bill in the offering plate the Sunday before they came. I asked her later how it went. She said, "They were really a handful, but we managed. The Sunday after they left I put a \$100 in the offering plate!"

It's important for parents and grandparents to bring their children to church and to make sure they have spiritual training from the earliest age. It's rare, but every now and then I'll come upon a set of parents who don't want to influence their children spiritually. They just want them to grow up and be exposed to many difference ideas and when they are old enough they'll decided for themselves. That's a dangerous strategy.

Two fathers who were discussing this very topic. One man talked about how important it was to train his children in the truths of the Bible. The other man disagreed and said he wanted his children to grow up with no spiritual instruction. It was clear they weren't going to convince each other, so finally the father who believed in spiritual training changed the subject. He said, "Would you care to see my garden?" The other man said, "Sure." They walked around the house and saw a patch of ground overgrown with weeds, thorns and thistles. The guest said, "Why that's no garden, that's just an overgrown weed bed." The owner said, "My philosophy of farming is that I never want to prejudice the soil in any way. I don't want to influence the soil with good seeds. I just let whatever is in the soil grow." His friend said, "Now I know why you think spiritual training of your children is a wise strategy. I agree."

There is a powerful promise found in Proverbs 22:6, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."

Many parents have misunderstood that verse. That think if you indoctrinate your kids correctly, they may wander off, but when they turn 65 or 70 they'll always come back to God. What a waste. Some parents see the word "train" and it may take many forms like stern discipline to rote memorization of rules and regulations. They make growing up in this kind of a home a lot like basic training in the military.

But this word "train" in the Hebrew language is a beautiful word. It was a word used by Hebrew midwives who delivered babies. They would roll their forefingers in a mixture of olive oil and sweet crushed dates. Then they would slip their finger into the infant's mouth and massage the palate to stimulate the sucking instinct. They were creating in the baby a desire for nourishment. Our job as parents and grandparents is to create a desire in our kids for the things of God. It is to show them that the things of God are sweet and nourishing to them. And once you create that desire in them to know God, they never really lose it. They may fight against it and rebel, but that desire is there as much as a baby grows up wanting to drink nourishment.

2. JESUS WARNS AGAINST HINDERING CHILDREN FROM APPROACHING HIM

As the parents brought these children, the disciples started acting like bodyguards trying to keep the riff-raff away from Jesus. We read, "The disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this he was indignant...He said, 'Do not hinder them.'" (Mark 10:13-14) Now, before we are too hard on the disciples, we're told in verse 1, that Jesus and his disciples had left Judea and they were on the other side of the Jordan River. They were in the land of Perea, and these people weren't Jews. The disciples assumed Jesus didn't want to waste His time on Gentile children, but they were wrong. In fact, this is one of the few times the Bible says Jesus got angry. He was indignant.

During the first century in the Roman Empire, children were not valued. In Rome there is a preserved papyrus letter from a Roman soldier to his wife. She was expecting a child. Her husband writes, "If our child is a son, keep him. But if our child is a female throw it away." They lived in the age of throwaway kids.

But Jesus loves the little children, even Gentile children. In the previous chapter Jesus had warned about danger of hindering a child from coming to Him. He said, "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck." (Mark 9:42)

A millstone was used to grind olives. It weighed over a ton. Can you imagine having one of those tied to your neck and pushed overboard? Jesus meant you'd be better off dead than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.

I shudder every time I think about how wicked men are enlisting children in child pornography, or using them to sell their illegal drugs. Children around the world are being used and abused in the wicked web of sexual slavery that reaches from East Texas to every nation. My heart breaks

for those precious children, but I think the hottest places in hell must be reserved for those adults who are using these children.

Sometimes parents are the ones who can be stumbling blocks to their children. Some parents don't want their children going to church or learning about the Bible. Every year at VBS, we have many dozens of older children who hear the Gospel and they respond by accepting Christ as their Savior. Of course, we contact all the parents about their child's decision. Most parents are overjoyed that their child has accepted Christ. But every year there are a few that almost resent the fact that we told their child the story of salvation. I can recall stories that Miss Lanette and Jennifer Grisby have shared with me about kids who were excited about their decisions for Christ, but their parents didn't permit them to follow through. That breaks my heart as well.

Whether you're a parent, a grandparent, or a teacher, children are always watching you. The words we say can either draw them closer to the Lord or drive them farther away.

R.L. Sharpe wrote, "Isn't it strange that princes and kings; And clowns that caper in sawdust rings; And common folk like you and me; Are the builders of eternity? To each is given a bag of tools, A shapeless mass and a book of rules; And each must make, 'ere time is flown, A stumbling-block or a stepping-stone."

When it comes to children, make sure you are building stepping-stones!

3. IT'S EASIER TO COME TO CHRIST AS A CHILD

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me...and he took them in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them." (Mark 10:14, 16) The very best time for a person to come to Jesus is as a child. I am often asked how old a child needs to be before they can accept Christ. They need to be old enough to recognize that they are a sinner who needs Jesus. We call this the age of accountability. All kids in church grow up learning scripture and they talk about having Jesus in their heart from a very early age. And all kids are sinners. They are born selfish. They grab all the toys. They are born rebellious. They learn to say, "NO!" But they are just playing out their instinct to sin. A child before the age of accountability doesn't need to be saved because they are SAFE. That's why we believe if an infant or a toddler dies, they go straight to heaven; they aren't accountable for their sin. When King David's infant son died he said, "He cannot return to me, but I can go to him." David believed his son was in heaven.

But once a child reaches an age around 5, 6, 7, or 8—it varies. They cross a line where all of a sudden they know what sin is, and they choose to disobey God or their parents. The best time for a child to be saved is once they understand they are a sinner who needs Jesus.

I recall when my daughter Jenni was saved. She grew up in the church and knew all the language. But one evening, we were driving home from church in Alabama and it was just the two of us. There was a terrible thunderstorm. Jenni said she was afraid of thunderstorms and she always ran into our room when it stormed. I said that I used to be afraid of thunderstorms, but one of the things that helped me was having Jesus in my heart to give me courage. She asked me how she could have that courage, so right there on the side of a street in a thunderstorm, I

explained it to her and she prayed the simple prayer of a five-year-old. And today, she will tell you that's where she was born again.

Laura Grace was six years old. She attended a day care led by Mrs. Griffin who believed God had called her to tell children about Jesus. One night as Cindy tucked L.G. into bed, they talked about Mrs. Griffin's lesson and Laura Grace prayed to receive Christ.

The easiest time for people to come to Christ is when they are children. George Barna's research group has gathered the data to prove this. A few years ago they did an extensive study about the age when people came to Christ. Their findings are interesting. In America 50% of Christians come to know the Lord before age 13; 64% come to Christ before age 18; 77% come to Christ before age 21. And only 23% of the Christians in the U.S. came to Christ after the age of 21.

So parents, and grandparents, if you have kids in your family who are seven, eight, or nine years old, I encourage you to share the plan of salvation with them. It will never be easier for them to trust Jesus than it is right now.

4. TO ENTER GOD'S KINGDOM YOU MUST THINK LIKE A CHILD

Jesus said, "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Mark 10:15) You may not be a parent, or a child. You're wondering if God has a word for you. Here it is. The only way ANYONE at any age can come to Jesus is to receive His kingdom as a child. Let me mention three childlike characteristics we must emulate.

A. A sense of awe and wonder

Alfred Lloyd Tennyson wrote about going into his grandson's bedroom one morning and seeing the child "worshipping the sunbeam that was playing on his bedpost." The longer we live; it seems we lose that sense of awe and wonder.

I can remember the first Christian song I learned. It was awesome because I really believed it. Why don't you try singing it with me, but through the eyes of a six-year-old. "Jesus loves me this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but He is strong. Yes, Jesus love me. Yes, Jesus love me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so." I have a degree from college and a Master's and a Doctor's degrees from seminary, but in my entire life, I have never encountered any truth more profound than what is taught in that song.

B. A simple trust

We try to make things too complicated. Theology is deep, but you aren't saved by theology. We're saved by grace through faith. Saving faith is simple. Most of you know James and Gillian Sheridan. They are leaders in our church and community. In 2009 Gillian spoke to me about her parents in Minnesota. They had gone to church all their lives but weren't sure if they were going to go to heaven. They were part of a church that didn't talk much about being born again. They were going to be visiting Tyler and she asked if I could sit down and talk with them. So one afternoon, these sweet, good, church-going folks sat down with me and I shared the simple plan

of salvation with them. The same way I would share it with a child. They said nobody had ever told them that before, so they both prayed and received Christ. They were happy, and Gillian and James were happy. And four weeks ago, Gillian's mother passed away. And she woke up in the presence of Jesus because she had trusted the Lord with a simple child-like faith.

Do you have a simple trust in God? When you were a child you didn't have to worry about what you were going to wear or eat, because your parents were going to provide for you. That kind of absolute trust and confidence should be the way we relate to our Heavenly Father today. He has told us that we don't have to worry about any of these things. He will take care of us.

C. A spirit of forgiveness

As adults, when someone injures or wrongs us, we are slow to forgive. We tend to carry grudges. Some of you can think of people right now who have hurt you and you still haven't forgiven them. You'd rather nurse your grudge than let them go. Kids are quick to forgive. They don't carry grudges. They can be fussing with their playmates, but in a few minutes they're playing again.

When I was about 12 years old, I got into a knockdown-drag-out fistfight with one of my best friends, Paul, at R.A.s. We were playing softball and we argued whether a ball was foul or fair. We were yelling, and pretty soon, the fists were flying. The leader pulled us apart, and made us shake hands. The game was over and within ten minutes Paul and I were drinking Mountain Dew with our arms around each other. The fight was completely forgotten. Would you ask God to allow you to think like a child and be quick to forgive?

CONCLUSION

It was on a cold, rainy Monday morning in New Jersey. A visiting pastor announced that he would preach daily morning services every week during Holy Week. A ten-year-old boy walked through the rain to attend the service. When the visiting pastor walked out, he saw that the boy was the only person in the church. Years later, after the boy became a man, he wrote about his experience on that Monday morning. "I wondered what the Minister would do, but when the hour set for worship arrived the pastor walked into the pulpit and began the service as if the church was filled to capacity. He looked down at me with a smile of great sincerity and spoke earnestly to me about the love of God. When the time came for the offering, the minister held out the offering plate and I walked to the front and placed my nickel in the plate. The pastor smiled at me and placed his big, gentle hand on my head. In walking back to my seat, I knew this man's God was a real God, and that every child mattered to God. It left a lump in my throat, and I cannot think of it today without emotion."

That was a turning point in the spiritual development of this boy. He started reading the Bible every day for the rest of his life. His name was Cecil B. Demille, who would grow up to become one of the most successful movie producers in Hollywood. He produced movies like, "The Ten Commandments," "The King of Kings," and "The Sign of the Cross." He once said, "My ministry has been to make religious movies and to get more people to read the Bible than anyone else ever has."

Who can calculate the impact that pastor had on a ten-year-old boy when he cared enough to show him God's love when he was the only one at church. Every Sunday we have the same opportunity to impact and influence children. Let's welcome them and treat each one of them as if they are the next Elizabeth Elliot or the next Billy Graham!

Remember, it's a small world...after all!

OUTLINE

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- B. A simple trust
- C. A spirit of forgiveness

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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