

(Picture of JFK/John John) It's a heartwarming picture from the Kennedy presidency. As you can see, President Kennedy is working in the Oval Office while young JFK Jr. or *John John*, as he was called, plays under the desk. The picture suggests that even though he was the most powerful man in the world at the time, the President made space in his schedule for his children.

JFK was very faithful to preserve his thoughts and feelings about both world events and everyday experiences through the use of the Dictaphone in the Oval Office. One day, in 1963, the President was very discouraged by recent events in Vietnam. The situation hadn't been handled well and Kennedy had sat down at his desk to record his thoughts and feelings about lessons learned from the experience. As he spoke with both an obvious tone of frustration and concern, one can hear another voice on the recording literally out of nowhere. "*Hello,*" says the childish voice of three-year-old John John. The toddler completely ignores the significance of the moment or the subject matter his father is attempting to preserve.

What's equally fascinating is that when John John broke into the recording, his father, the President, immediately shifted his attention and focus to his little son. For the next few minutes they talked about the seasons of the year and the things that they did in their family during those various times. In an instant, the mood and conversation shifted from coups, warfare and Vietnam to leaves on trees, sailboats and Hyannis Port, Massachusetts...all because a little boy wandered into the room and his father stopped to listen to him.

President Kennedy had no idea how fleeting such moments would be in his life with his son. Three weeks later JFK would be assassinated in Dallas.

A similar scene unfolds in our text today from Luke's gospel. The disciples and Jesus, like JFK, find themselves at a critical juncture. The masses continue to respond to Jesus in different ways that's leading to both rewarding opportunities for teaching and ministry, and tense occasions for interacting with the Jewish power structure. They're good days and strained ones—all at the same time. Much is on the line. In the midst of all this, a group of parents with their young children show up seeking Jesus' time, attention and blessing. Turn to Luke 18:15-17 (p. 877).

Last Wednesday, Jane and I had the privilege of visiting Chris and Caroline Brown at the hospital after the birth of their son, *Finn* (**picture**).

We love babies. We love children. Children are masterpieces from the creative hand of the Triune God. It's not a surprise that Jesus, the incarnate God-man, was a lover of children. Many of Jesus' miracles involved children – healing a nobleman's little son, the demonized "only son" of the man at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, and Jairus' daughter to whom Jesus tenderly said, "*Little lamb, arise.*" Jesus loved children and we should too.

While children are valued today, they weren't back then. Search ancient literature for kindness to or valuing of children, other than Jesus' tenderness to them, you'll have difficulty finding it. David Garland (**picture**) warns against imposing our contemporary ideas of children on this passage. In the Greco-Roman world children had no social status. Unwanted babies were thrown out with the garbage. Others were raised as prostitutes, slaves and gladiators. Some were disfigured to enhance their value as beggars. Much of the world still treats children like that. They're used as slaves in factories in dangerous, unhealthy conditions. They're the chattel of the modern sex-trade industry. But in what was counter-cultural in His day, Jesus welcomes children and exalts their status.

Throughout the Gospels we continually find that Jesus loved, cared and ministered to those no one else cared about; the disenfranchised and marginalized. Last week we studied Jesus compassion for a hated tax collector. Jesus loves those others despise; the deplorables and despicable. He calls us to do the same. Like Him we're to be **Ministering to the Marginalized**. In our passage, children represent the marginalized. It's only as we minister to the marginalized that we demonstrate that have God's heart, that we're Jesus in a cold, cruel world. If you're taking notes...

1. Jesus always welcomes the marginalized. It wasn't uncommon in that day to bring children to a rabbi or spiritual leader. As an infant, Jesus was brought to Simeon in the temple. It was in keeping with a classic Jewish custom. The patriarch, Jacob, placed his hands on the heads of Joseph's children, Ephraim and Manasseh and blessed them (Gen. 48:14). Proud parents held out their precious children to Jesus who took them in His arms where they were snuggled close. Placing His hand on their warm, soft heads, lifting His eyes to heaven, He pronounced a blessing. It's obvious that Jesus thoroughly enjoyed such opportunities.

This precious scene is recorded in 3 of the 4 Gospels. It shows the great love that Jesus has for children and how gentle He was. Parents would never have trusted Him or put their children in His arms, if that hadn't been the case. If we love Jesus, we'll love children too, and children will love us. They'll see in us the same love that attracted children to Jesus. There's something wrong with a Christian who doesn't love children.

Parents, the best thing you can do is to follow the example of the parents in this passage. If you have children, you have the awesome responsibility to see that your children learn about God. The very best thing you can give your child is the gift of knowing that they're loved by God and His plan of salvation has been provided for them by the gift of God's own Son.

Today many parents even in the Church neglect and some even refuse to bring their children to Jesus. Some foolishly say things like, *"I don't want to force my children. They need to decide for themselves what they believe."* Each child will eventually choose. It's part of individual responsibility. But why is it only when it comes to faith we leave them to be completely independent. Do we let them choose about school? Or, the dentist? Parents have an obligation to *"train up a child in the way that they should go."* Jesus is the only source of forgiveness, peace, joy and eternal life. If we neglect our parental responsibility we're not teaching them to make their own decisions, we're essentially abandoning them spiritually.

One of America's greatest patriots was Patrick Henry (**picture**). Remember his famous quote, *"Give me liberty or give me death."* It wasn't the only noble thing that he said. When Patrick Henry prepared His last will and testament, he added this statement to be read to his children at his death: *"I have now disposed of all my property to my family. There is one thing more I wish I could give them, and that is the Christian faith. If they had that, and I had not given them one shilling, they would have been rich; and if they had not that, and I had given them all the world, they would be poor."*

Many Christian parents worry about their kids' inheritance, when they need to be worried about their eternity. It's why it's vital that we're concerned about children's spaces and ministries here at Grace. We must treat children the same way Jesus treated them. It's vital that we have a great children's ministry. When new families with children visit our church, they're more concerned about children's spaces and ministry than they are about the preaching or music. Someone said *a nursery is the handshake of the church.*

These parents had to believe in Jesus personally in order to bring their children to Him. They had enough personal faith to bring their children to receive this blessing from Jesus. Do you?

Someone asked Albert Schweitzer (**picture**) how children learn. He replied, *"Three ways. By example, by example, and by example."* Children listen to our *lives*, not *lectures*. The Bible clearly puts the responsibility for spiritual training in the home on fathers. We must teach our children how to know Christ and walk daily with Him. In addition to verbal teaching, our lives must back up our words. Nothing drives a child away from the faith faster than hypocrisy. I'm not talking about perfection, but reality with Christ. Our daily lives should manifest the fruit of the Spirit in our homes.

I can't help but think though that there's more going on here. Maybe it was a way of protecting their children. Infant mortality rate at that time was high. 28% of all babies died within the first year of life. Many died before they were five. These parents brought their children to Jesus to bless them, to communicate a sense of personal care, and perhaps to protect them.

Jesus always welcomes the marginalized. Throughout the Gospels we see the open arms of Jesus to those the world dismisses. He welcomed and valued immoral women, He associated with tax-collectors, Samaritans, and touched lepers. Jesus looked past the labels, a person's appearance, income level, or social status. He saw each person as one created in the image of God; a person so loved by God that the Father sent Jesus to die for them.

How about us? Do we care about the marginalized? Too often we don't. Often we love church children, but not children outside the church. Many church leaders face the pressure of *"we don't want those kids with our kids."*

How do we feel about families with a child with a disability? Or, a family member with mental illness? Someone who struggles with depression or suicidal thoughts? I heard someone say recently that mental illness is the non-casserole disease in the church. What about Hispanics? Addicts? Parolees or families with someone incarcerated?

When Jesus began His earthly ministry, He read from Isaiah: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* Jesus came for the marginalized and sends us to minister to the marginalized, too.

2. Too often we miss what God is about and doing, *"And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them."* We're not told why the disciples rebuked these parents. Their motives may have been pure. Maybe they're protecting Jesus, guarding His time. Maybe they knew He was tired. Maybe they had a cultural view of children. For whatever reason, they missed it. They didn't have Jesus' heart and were disconnected with what God was doing. They severely reprimanded these parents and it wasn't pretty.

This wouldn't be the last time they missed it. In the days of the early church, they overlooked the needs of Greek-born Jews. Peter was dragged kicking and screaming by the Spirit to share the gospel with Gentiles, and still he struggled. They didn't have Jesus' heart for the marginalized.

This is very important. The reason that they rebuked these parents wasn't biblical. It was either personal preference or tradition. We do the same thing when we put our preferences or tradition before biblical ministry.

Did you know the modern missionary movement was almost dead on arrival? Early missionaries like William Carey and Adoniram Judson had to go against many in the Church to take the gospel to India and Burma. We lost the inner cities of America because we were more concerned about the safety of white Christians than lost blacks who'd moved into our neighborhoods. We polarize X-ers and millennials when we're more concerned about winning political battles than hearts. Add to that, "those people" are tattooed and pierced, and they don't look like us.

The main reason the disciples turned them away is that they considered them of "little importance." They were ignorant of the heart of God. Look in your own soul. Who do you consider of "little importance"? Yet, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to die and has time for the marginalized and children.

Evangelist Luis Palau (**picture**) tells of an incident during a crusade in Bolivia. His day started with a breakfast where he shared Christ with a number of top government officials. He was looking forward to a luncheon with the Bolivian President. Mid-morning, he's in the middle of a press conference in his hotel room when there's a knock on the door. A team member walked in with a small Bolivian girl, about 11. She'd seen Palau on TV and was anxious to talk to him. Luis felt a bit irritated with the team member for bringing her into his room while he's meeting with the press, but he greeted her, picked up a book, signed it, and gave it to her. "Lord bless you, sweetheart," he said, as he began leading her to the door. She took two steps, looked back, and said, "But Mr. Palau, I really wanted to receive Christ into my heart." Luis was caught up short. He dismissed the press, sat down, and led her to Jesus. **Often we miss what God is about and doing.**

3. Jesus calls us to build bridges, not barriers, *"But Jesus called them to Him, saying, 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of God'."* Twice Jesus uses that phrase *"the kingdom of God."* Those who have power and influence in this world's structures must give way to the seemingly powerless and insignificant of the Kingdom of God. The first become last; the last become first. It's John Stott's (**picture**) *Christian Counterculture*. To be a follower of Christ is to be committed to a values revolution. It challenges our most basic assumptions about how society should operate.

Mark's Gospel describes the scene this way, *"And Jesus took the children in His arms, put His hands on them and blessed them"* (Mark 10:16). Rough hands of a Carpenter became soft and tender as Jesus used them to hug those children. Hands that'd soon be hammered to a Roman cross are used to express affection to little toddlers.

Mark also tells us that when Jesus learned the disciples were keeping the children away, He became *indignant*. It's the same word used when Jesus took a whip and drove crooked money changers from the Temple. Jesus gets hot in a hurry when He sees people being a barrier to the marginalized. It's a strong warning we must heed.

Mahatma Gandhi (**picture**) though a Hindu, admired Jesus and often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. When E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi, he asked, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming His follower?" Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Gandhi's rejection of Christianity grew out of an incident that happened when he was a young man practicing law in South Africa. He'd become attracted to Christianity, had studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was seriously exploring becoming a Christian, so he decided to attend a church service. As he came up the steps of the large church where he intended to go, a white South African elder of the church barred his way at the door. "Where do you think you're going, Kaffir?" the man asked Gandhi in a belligerent tone. Gandhi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here." The church elder snarled, "There's no room for Kaffirs in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps." From that moment Gandhi decided to adopt the good he found in Christianity, but would never again consider becoming a Christian if it meant being part of the Church.

The disciples were barriers. *Are we?* Jane's niece and her husband just returned from a missions trip to India. They went with a group from their church. It was a great trip, but they were grieved with some Americans who went with them who were complaining about the Indian food. They were barriers. Usually, when we're complaining we're barriers to the gospel. Christians can be some of the biggest whiners. It's hard to witness to a lost family member or co-worker when you're known as a griper.

Let me share another barrier and sadly, it's far too common. One of the greatest barriers can be a spiritually lukewarm spouse. Frequently, one spouse wants to step up spiritually, the other drags their feet. An unsaved spouse is often less of a deterrent to Kingdom purposes than a lukewarm one. They discourage involvement or generosity. They're chronically critical. The other spouse holds back...it's not worth the fight.

We build bridges when we see others as guests. What do you do for a guest? You give them the best seat. You serve them first. You go out of your way to make them comfortable. You're kind and thoughtful. You smile. Just a simple smile is such a bridgebuilder.

Are you building bridges? We have newcomers at Grace every week. Many don't know the Lord. Are we good hosts?

Are you known at work, where you shop, in your neighborhood as the gracious one? Are you a bridge-builder? Jesus encourages us to build bridges with the marginalized. Are you a **bridge or barrier for the kingdom**?

4. Salvation begins with a simple, childlike faith, *"Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."* Not only are children legitimate candidates to come to Jesus and enter His kingdom, but no one can enter the kingdom unless they do so *"like a child."*

The quality children possess in abundance is their unworthiness. They don't have some long resume of spiritual accomplishments to tempt them with works-righteousness like the Pharisee we studied last week. One of the surprises of the kingdom of God is that it's *those* kind of people, and only those kinds of people, who enter into the kingdom.

What does it mean to have childlike faith? It means being *childlike*, not *childish*. The only way to enter God's kingdom is to become like a child and be born-again (John 3). Children are the best illustration of how people are saved. The redeemed are saved by God's sovereign grace, despite their spiritual ignorance and lack of any achievements that'd merit salvation. To have childlike faith means...

Utter Helplessness. Every child is born into this world absolutely helpless, and so it is with every child who is born into the kingdom of God. Even if a Billy Graham type enters the kingdom of God, it won't be because he's preached to millions or been impeccable in his finances or a faithful husband or even that in spite of his fame, he remained a humble, self-effacing man. No, Billy Graham will only enter the kingdom, because he first came to Christ as a helpless child. It's because of God's undeserved kindness.

Absolute Trust. Jane's brother-in-law, Fred Froman, is 6' 6". He'd scare folk around him when his children were very small. Fred would have them stand on his hand and hold them up over his head. They'd giggle. Fred would smile. They had absolute trust in their Dad. Children trust others for everything (food, lodging, clothing). It's what we must have to enter God's Kingdom, total trust. Becoming a child of God means we come to Him with the trust of a child. We believe the Lord can provide all we need for salvation. We trust His Word. We have faith and absolute trust in Him.

Simplistic Humility. Small children aren't proud of their virtues or accomplishments. A young child doesn't rank those around them. They don't feel the need to trumpet their good deeds to prove their superiority. They're candid about their needs. They come to their parents when they hurt and need comfort. When they're hungry or need their diaper changed, they ask for help. They're honest and transparent (often to the embarrassment of their parents.) The person who has faith comes to the Lord with open hands. They don't try to impress God, but come just as they are. They're honest about their sin and pray with honest simplicity. A child doesn't debate with God, or try to instruct the Almighty. They submit, listen, and they follow.

Unquestioning Receptivity. Children know how to receive a gift. They just take it. A child takes its food, parents' love and protection because they're given, without thinking about whether they're deserved. We, too, must receive God's kingdom simply because it's given and in faith enter into it.

Overwhelming Love. Children easily return love for gifts. Enthusiastic hugs and kisses and multiple "thanks" are showered on the giver. Spiritually, *"we love because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19). Overwhelming love and gratitude is the life of the kingdom as little children.

5. When you become a child of God, God becomes your Heavenly Father. There's an outcome of being a child of God that's inferred in this passage. It's an outcome of our new relationship – we have a Heavenly Father. Our world suffers from "Father Hunger." That's a phrase used to describe children growing up in a family without a strong and compassionate father figure. Children growing up in homes like that desperately want a father. Often they'll look for someone (or something) to fill that void. On a much larger scale, it's the story of all humanity. We were made to know God and want to know Him, but our sin has separated us from God. As a result, we're left with a deep "Father Hunger" that won't go away.

In Christ we've discovered the greatest news of all. God is not some impersonal deity. He's not the Force or chance, or something mystical. In Christ we've discovered the most important truth of the universe – our God is a father who loves you so much that He did something we'd never think of doing. He gave His own Son to die for us. He loves you inconceivably and did the inconceivable. He gave His Son for you, proving He's a Father who truly loves his children. All that a good father is to his children God is to His children. Your Heavenly Father's patience and kindness never runs out. He's always approachable. You'll never have to earn His love and will never blow it enough to lose his love. He always has your very best in mind.

Conclusion: This passage brings us back to the open arms of Jesus to those the world dismisses. Jesus welcomed the marginalized. He saw the intrinsic value of the individual. He always saw a person as one created in the image of God; a person so loved by God that He sent Jesus to die for them.

Are we like Jesus? Are we committed to the gospel, to loving the broken and marginalized? God has equipped our church to serve those the world rejects. The first step isn't another program. It's humility. It's the self-emptying humility of our Lord "*who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.*" This mind of Christ won't allow us to hide, but empowers us to embrace the most marginalized.

Ministering to the marginalized requires loving human touch if they're to know the love of God poured out on the cross. Believers are the agents for this relational care. Jesus demonstrated it when He served marginalized individuals, groups, and communities in areas of poverty, hunger, sickness, demon possession, and social injustice. The early church had to choose to radically change its negative attitudes towards them. It resulted in the greatest growth the Church has ever known because of the conversion of Gentiles who first felt God's love through transformed Christians.

Perhaps before engaging in a ministry to the marginalized, each of us should ask the following questions: *What am I doing for Christ? What's my attitude toward the marginalized? Do I speak words of kindness, sympathy, and love? Am I putting forth efforts to win others to the Savior?"*

Ministering to the Marginalized can't be done by proxy. Money donated won't accomplish it. Sermons won't do it. It's touch, connection, spending time with the marginalized, talking, praying, sympathizing with them. That's how we'll win hearts. To do it, we need determined, persevering faith, unwearied patience and Christ's love flowing through us.

What are the **Take home truths** for us? Let me suggest four things.

Spend time with the marginalized, developing relationships, and sharing the gospel with them.

Be kind and compassionate to the marginalized.

Minister to the poor, sick, mentally ill and challenged, young, old, the list goes on, realizing that the greatest need is for them to embrace the gospel.

Pray for our church that we have Jesus' heart. Pray for the marginalized. Pray that the Lord will burden more to care.

Pray that we will realize that this is for all Christians, not just a select few, not just pastors or church leaders, but for every child of God that's part of His Kingdom!