

Children and the Kingdom of God

School is starting in the next few days and I want us to take some time this morning to recognize and pray for the teachers and administrators that attend our church. We have a number of folks that work in our public school systems as well as in Christian schools and universities. We have principals and administrators at several levels. If you are working in school, in education at any level, would you stand. I'd like for you to come forward and I want us to pray for God's blessing and favor to rest upon you. It's not like it used to be in the schools and classrooms. There are incredible challenges facing our teachers and I want you to know we are behind you, we support you, we are praying for you. We are going to pray that God will give you strength, protection, wisdom to teach and to deal with students, parents and with the problems that arise; that God will grant you favor and that through your life, though many of you are unable to openly share the gospel, your life will be a major influence upon the lives of your students. Can we show our appreciation to our teachers? Let's pray.

School is about to start. I should let you know that I hated school. Every year I dreaded it. My stomach hurt, my head hurt, I was worried about new teachers and new classes and new kids and the incredible potential for embarrassment that lurked in the shadows of every day of elementary and junior high school. Any day could be the day when you would be humiliated beyond recovery in your academic career. The day the nickname from hell would be attached to you because of something you said or did or something your mother insisted you wear. I remember elementary school somehow as being years of trauma but then again, maybe I've exaggerated the memories somewhat.

At the same time, I have to admit there was something kind of exhilarating about the first day of school. New school clothes if you could afford them, new notebook and lunch pail for us baby boomers, had that little plastic bag thing in there with pencils and a compass and protractor, whatever that was for. Kind of cool in a sense. Okay, so maybe it wasn't all traumatic. Maybe it was kind of cool at times being a kid. (I know, goats are kids, we were children. But I was still a kid.)

Since it is the beginning of school, I want to talk about children and the kingdom of God. I want to look at two passages of Scripture in the gospel where Jesus speaks

specifically about children and he says something very important about how all of us are to embrace the kingdom of God. Turn first to Mark 10:13.

The bible says, **“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.” Mark 10:13-16**

Jesus said we must receive the kingdom of God like a child! How does a child receive something? Think about it.

A child receives everything with joy. A child receives everything with wonderment, enthusiasm, curiosity, excitement. Hand an infant anything and their face lights up and they smile and then put it in their mouth. You can give a child a stick and they are glad to receive it. They receive with joy.

God wants us to receive the kingdom like a child with bright eyed wonder and amazement at the goodness and faithfulness of God. His kingdom has come to us through his Son Jesus Christ. He has given us this amazing gift of grace and life and new mercy every day. There should be nothing nonchalant about this. We should receive his kingdom and his gifts with joy and enthusiasm, and with a sense of wonderment at his great love and grace. Receive it and keep on receiving it that way. Everyday is an adventure of grace and faith, walking with the Lord as part of a kingdom where all things are possible. Receive it all with joy.

A child receives everything with a sense of trust. Children are usually non-cynical, non-skeptical. We consider them to be rather gullible, in the 1 Cor. 13 sense that they hope all things and believe all things. A child doesn't try to figure out why you gave him the gift, he just enjoys the gift. Adults can't enjoy gifts because they are too busy thinking, “I wonder what he's up to? I wonder why he would give me a gift like that? What does he want in return? Do I have to buy him a gift now. Do I deserve this gift? Do you think I should give it back?” A child receives a gift because it's a gift. That's what you do! “Cool, it's for me! Are there any more?”

A child trusts that what his father or mother gives him is right and good for him. An infant doesn't throw the bottle back at the parent and say, "I don't know if I can trust you or not. I hardly know you." They receive with a total sense of trust and acceptance. It's the way they embrace life and relationship. "You love me and you take care of me so I trust what I receive from you is for my good and not my harm. It's to help me have a great future."

I used to balance the girls in my hand when they were babies. I see Dads throw their child up in the air. A child believes you are going to toss them in the air and catch them and not drop them. They trust you and they laugh when you do it. They believe you are going to take care of them. This is how we are to receive the life and grace and good gifts of God. There is no reason to doubt our Heavenly Father. We can enjoy being with him, enjoy the way he leads us certain that he isn't going to drop us, positive that he is going to care for us. This is how we experience life, knowing that he will catch us if we've been tossed into the air recently. We can trust that he loves us and only has good things in store for us. Receive the good gifts of God with joy, enthusiasm, not with suspicion and doubt.

We are to receive the kingdom of God like little children – with joy! "Wow! This is incredible isn't it. My life has been changed. Look how good God is!" He wants us to receive the kingdom with acceptance. We can't figure it all out and that's okay. We don't have to. But like a child we are to gladly accept whatever Jesus has for us. He wants us to trust him. Abandon yourself to his loving care like a child trusting his father as he picks him up and throws him in the air. "Throw me up in the air Jesus. Spin me around. Throw me higher Jesus. Go faster and higher because I know I can trust you with all of my life." You don't have to doubt or be afraid. You are a child of your loving Heavenly Father.

A child doesn't argue over the check. Children don't try to earn gifts. They know to receive a gift as a gift. You don't hear a child say, "Look, I appreciate the toys, but could I do something in return to earn this instead, you know, maybe clean my room and vacuum the house, wash the car and mow the lawn. Would that pay for this because I just don't deserve such a nice gift." If you've got a child like that, tell me about him or her. Most kids instead say, "Wow. For me? Thanks for the present. Can

I open it now? Can I play with it now?"

The Lord delights in giving us the keys to the kingdom. He gives us every good and perfect gift, but we receive it and immediately start trying to pick up the ticket, feeling guilty about being blessed. "Here let me get that God." He says, "You don't have enough to cover it. The debt is too great. Why don't you just let me take care of it and you just enjoy the gift?" "But Lord, couldn't I earn it or work for it? I don't really deserve to be this happy so I can't really enjoy it unless..." "Just enjoy the gift."

Have you thought about the joy you feel when your kids rip open a present that you knew they really wanted. You don't insist that they earn it, – "glad to give you this gift you wanted. Now you're going to need to work off this debt for the next three years by slaving away here at the house. Enjoy!" – no, you are just delighted that they are enjoying the gift. You are happy because they are so happy. I think God is delighted when we receive the kingdom of God with joy. When we receive him and his grace and his amazing love and we start to rejoice and shout and dance and sing and weep and cry and worship and fall before him – with joy. He is delighted.

We are to become like little children and receive the kingdom of God like a child. **Children know how to celebrate.** Grown-ups get all sophisticated and proper, but kids know how to express their joy with freedom, with liberty, with exuberance. It's time we strip off a few layers of self-consciousness and lose ourselves in loving and adoring and worshiping Jesus. We used to sing "Jesus we celebrate your victory, Jesus, we revel in your love." Revel means "boisterous festivity, merry making, celebrate." Children know how to revel in his love but I don't know if we grown-ups do or not. But Jesus said if we wanted to receive the kingdom, if we want his life within us, then we need to be like children and receive the kingdom like children. Let's try receiving from his hand with joy and celebration. (Watching kids jumping in the inflatable jupiter jump yesterday. Grown-ups forgot how to celebrate. Let's revel in his love.)

Look now at the passage in Matthew 18. **"At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said, 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the**

greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” Matthew 18:1-6.

Jesus said we had to change and become like little children or we would never enter the kingdom of heaven. Turn around and become like children – that means we make a conscious decision to live a different way. He gives us a couple of ideas as to what that might look like.

Humble. Jesus said we needed to humble ourselves like a child. 2 year olds don't have much of a resume or list of accomplishments. They haven't done anything to be proud of, they just simply are. And they are loved simply because they are.

You hold your newborn daughter and think, “I love this child.” But what has she done? Nothing! I just love her. She can't look up and hope to impress us. We think perhaps we need to try to impress our way into the kingdom of God. If we work real hard God and others will be impressed with us and our accomplishments. Really? Our best is on a par with a newborn child in God's eyes. We have nothing to show for ourselves besides what a newborn has to show for himself. We know how to make a mess and lie in it and that's about it most of the time.

Jesus said it's time to change and humble ourselves. When we humble ourselves, we admit we have nothing that would commend us to God. We are like every infant – powerless, helpless, humbled. The hymn writer wrote, “Nothing of myself I bring, only to the cross I cling.” It's not by our works or accomplishments but by his grace alone that we can be with him.

Dependent. Infants can't survive without someone present to help them. Nurturing, feeding, providing for them. It seems difficult for us at times to admit about ourselves that we are dependent. We fight for our independence, to choose to go our own way, but where does that way take us? The bible says there is a way that a man chooses, that seems right to him, but the end of that way is death. We need to become as a child and depend upon the Lord, choosing to go his way. As a child depends upon her father for everything, we need to depend upon our Heavenly Father. Surrender to him and his way, depend upon him because his ways are best. Admit you can't do it

alone. Admit you need his help, his guidance, his counsel, his direction. Admit it and cast all your cares upon him. Don't lean upon your own understanding or your own strength, but lean upon the Lord. You can depend on him.

Transparent. It's another way of saying honest and innocent. Children don't know how to be deceptive. They aren't very good at it. It's us grown-ups and parents that teach children how to be sneaky and deceptive. (Sneaking out of the house with their hands behind their back. "Where you going? What you got?" "Nowhere. Nothing.")

To enter the kingdom we need to become as little children and stop hiding. It's how we take the first step. We admit we are sinners and we need a Savior. We let Jesus look inside and clean out the sin and pride. We tell God the truth about ourselves. Admit you need God's help. Admit you need others. Admit you are totally reliant upon the Lord. Be honest.

Welcoming. Here is another great thing about children. They are welcoming. Jesus said whoever welcomes one of these little children welcomes me. Jesus wants us to live with an open-armed - open handed approach to others. We want to welcome Jesus into every area and aspect of our lives and we want to welcome others into the kingdom of God as well.

It's interesting how children tend to be more tolerant. They are taught prejudice by parents and grown-ups. They are taught to hate. Taught racism. Left on their own, children will befriend most anyone. Jesus instructs us to be as children and welcome others into the kingdom, into the knowledge of his love and grace.

I remember a couple of years ago walking in a neighborhood at Grand Lake. Some other families were walking with their kids and dogs. I petted the dog and started talking with the children as we walked. They told me they were staying with their grandparents on the lake. They were going home to have sandwiches. He said I could come play with their dog if I wanted to. And then he invited Paula and I to come home and have lunch with them. He told his grandma, "they're coming to eat lunch with us." I said, 'he told me we were having sandwiches...' Grandma looked pretty alarmed until I laughed and walked on.

The children were welcoming. Jesus says we are to welcome the children in his

name. Not judging and condemning, but welcoming, inviting them to come experience the kingdom of God. Jesus said, "Don't forbid the children. Don't keep them from coming to me." He welcomed them.

Let's be like Jesus. Let's be like little children. Let's be quick to welcome all who are willing to come to Jesus. Jesus said, "whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." How many times has Jesus walked through the doors of this church and not received much of a welcome? Every Wednesday night there are hundreds of children and youth that come to this place. And whoever welcomes them in Jesus name is welcoming him. Think about it. Here is the last thought.

Children believe Daddy can fix it. It's simple trust that brings a child to their father with a broken toy, a broken doll, a broken bicycle, not enough memory for their computer. Children believe that Dad can fix it. Children believe mom can kiss it and make it better. They don't have all the knowledge and experience and facts. They haven't been confused yet by the details. They just know it's broken and daddy can fix it because daddy can fix anything. They trust and believe in Daddy and Mommy.

They have a two stage concept for repair. 1). It's broken. 2) Take it to Daddy. That's it. It's that simple. We grown-ups have about a 10 stage concept. 1)Figure out what broke. 2)How did it break? (Who's responsible?) 3)How did it work to begin with? 4)How much would the parts cost? 5)How much would it cost to have it fixed? 6)When will I find the time to even try to fix it? 7)I wonder how much a new one cost? 8)I wonder if the kids will notice if I just throw it away? 9)When would be the best time to tell her I can't fix it? 10) What is my back up plan? e.g. Braums?

Part of that trust they have is based not just on confidence in daddy's ability, but rather confidence in the relationship. Daddy will want to fix it because Daddy loves me.

The Lord wants us to trust him and bring our problems to him, believing that he can fix it. He wants us to trust him, not just because he is big enough to fix it or powerful enough, but simply because of our relationship. He loves us so he wants to fix it for us. We can trust him and be secure in him because he loves us. It's because of our relationship.

I can rest in the knowledge that my heavenly Father, the one who can fix everything, is the one who loves me best of all. I don't have to figure it all out, I just

know he loves me and that is enough.

“Here Daddy. I don’t know how you will do it, but it’s broken and I can’t fix it. It’s too hard for me. It’s too broken for me. I can’t put it back together. You’ll fix it for me though, won’t you?”

That’s what we say as children coming to our Heavenly Father. He isn’t waiting on us to get our lives put back together so we can come home. He expects us to come to him because we know our heavenly Father can fix anything. “Here I am Father. I don’t know how you will ever do it, because I’m so broken and my life is so broken and my body is so broken and I can’t fix any of it. It’s beyond me. It’s too hard for me. But you can. You’ll fix it all for me, won’t you?”

We need to get back to that heavenly 2 step process. **1)We’re broken. 2)Take it to the Father.** And because he loves us, we can trust him that he will make things right in our lives.

We sing the little chorus: “Leave it there, leave it there, take your burden to the Lord and leave it there. If you trust and never doubt he will surely lead you out, take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.”

It’s what I think we children should do. Run to the Father with all our brokenness and leave it there. Bring it to him and ask him and trust him. Take your burden to him, like a child taking a problem to a loving father and leave it there, and let him fix it.