

To Whom Does the Kingdom of God Belong? (Part 1)

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[0:00] Amen. I thought I might earlier in the week. I thought, you know, I think I'd get these 15 verses in. And when it came down to it, there's no way. So we'll spend two Sundays in this passage, a very important passage, a very key passage in the Gospel of Luke. And so let me read the text before I'm doing more introducing it.

Then they also brought infants to him that he might touch them. But when the disciples saw it, they rebuked him. But Jesus called them to him and said, Let the little children come to me. Do not forbid it, for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God is a little child who by no means enter yet.

Now a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good teacher, what shall I do to encourage your life? So Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good but one that is God.

You know that the commandments do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not seal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and your mother. And he said, All these things I have kept from my youth.

So when Jesus heard these things, he said to him, You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Come follow me.

[2:11] But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich. And when Jesus saw that he became very sorrowful, he said, How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God.

For it is easier for a cattle to go through the eye of a knee than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Those who heard it said, Who then can be saved?

But he said, But he said, The things which are impossible with man, with men, are possible with God. Then Peter said, See, we have left all that follow you.

So he said to them, Assuredly, I say to you, There is no one who has left house for parents or brothers or wife or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not be seen many times more in this present time and in the age to come, eternal life.

All right. Interesting passage. And I would say to you by way of introduction this morning that we need to keep the context in mind.

[3:23] Always need to keep that in mind. And I don't always mention that, but I do quite frequently mention that. Kind of see how this fits in with the whole scheme of things.

I kind of thought or contemplated the title of the message of babies and billionaires. I don't know if I did. It's a good title. But it's not that, you know, not to just take this as an isolated, kind of too isolated a man.

It's saying, yeah. That's why I have read the entire text. It's not just the two stories, you know, about babies coming, being broadened, also this rich ruler.

But all those things that were said after that, all this goes together. And I would also tell you that these two stories here that I just read are also connected to the parable that we looked at last week. The parable of the Pharisee and the public. Or the tax collector. They go together. And I would say that the story of the babies being brought to Jesus for his blessing.

[4:29] That story is placed strategically between two things. The parable of the Pharisee and the public. And this story about the rich young ruler.

That little story about the infants being brought. It's placed there for a purpose right between those two things. And you remember that in the previous passage, the parable, it ended with the publican going to his house, what?

Justified. Justified. Meaning he was right with God. He was declared right with God. He was saved. And the publican, all of it, was because of the mercy of God.

We studied that last week. The publican brought nothing to the table. Nothing to commend him. Nothing of any worth to the table. He brought only his sin.

And a gracious God extended mercy to this sinner. And he was saved. And then we could say that the story of the babies being brought to Jesus provides a real-life illustration of this truth about salvation that we learned last week.

[5:43] Namely, that God's mercy alone is the basis upon which we are forgiven and accepted and declared just or declared righteous before God.

And then after that, we have the story of the rich ruler. You put all this together. Then the rich ruler, okay? So we would say that story, that story, is a real-life illustration of Satan's lie about salvation. It's the complete opposite of the truth of salvation. And that lie being that good works is the basis upon which we can be forgiven and accepted and declared righteous.

Which is a lie. It's not true. So I'm saying all of this to say that there's a clear kind of thread of continuity that runs throughout this entire passage, including the one we studied last week.

And that kind of continuity of truth that is woven in here, it pertains to the kingdom of God. We haven't really, since I don't know how many weeks back, we haven't really left the subject of the kingdom of God.

[6:58] Jesus has been talking about that all along. And so that is the thread that not only ties these, the text for this morning and the one from last week, ties those together, but even preceding those passages.

And here's the question, how does one enter the kingdom? That's the question that's being answered here. How does one enter into the kingdom of God?

Jesus started talking about the kingdom back there in chapter 17, verse 20, when a certain Pharisee approached him and asked him a question about it. And basically he was asking, when will the kingdom of God come?

So that kind of got the discussion started and everything that has happened since has been tied to that subject. And so after the question, Jesus, first of all, he teaches the what of the kingdom, the what of the kingdom.

And that is, it is the realm over which Christ is sovereign king. And then he teaches the when of the kingdom, that it is both now and also future.

[8:02] It's both invisible and also visible. I mean, right now the kingdom resides spiritually, wherever Jesus Christ is honored as Lord and King and obeyed as Lord and King.

That's where the kingdom resides now, spiritually, in the heart of the believer. But in the future, the kingdom will reside visibly over all the earth. One day Jesus will return and establish his kingdom. Now, the point is, only those who are part of his spiritual kingdom will be included in his visible kingdom. Now, our text this morning goes beyond the what of the kingdom and the when of the kingdom and teaches the how.

The how of the kingdom. The how of the kingdom. And this is the big question. How does one enter into the kingdom of God?

Both now, in its present tense, as well as in the future. And if, as Jesus says, you must be in the present kingdom in order to be in the future kingdom, then the question is, how?

[9:16] How? Or to ask the question from the perspective of the Pharisee praying in the temple, alluding back to the parable, the question would be, how can I be declared just or right with God?

Or to ask the question from the perspective of the disciples who were rebuking the parents for bringing their babies to Jesus, the question would be, who is able to enter into the kingdom of God? Or to ask the question from the perspective of the rich ruler who approached Jesus, what must one do to inherit eternal life?

You see, the thread that ties all of this together, and it's very important that we answer all those questions, and these are good questions. I mean, how can I be declared just or right with God? And who is able to enter into the kingdom of God? And what must one do to inherit eternal life? Those are three outstanding questions.

[10:15] And basically, it's the same question, just posed three different ways. And we could boil it down to this question, to whom does the kingdom of God belong?

Now, the simple answer to that is given, I believe, by Jesus in our passage this morning. That is, to whom does the kingdom belong?

And it's sufficiently clear. It's unambiguous. That is, if we don't make it too complicated, and a lot of times we try to do that. And here it is, kind of in a nutshell.

He tells us, first of all, about those who will be received into the kingdom of God and why. That's what we will focus on this morning.

Second, he tells us about those who will be rejected from the kingdom of God and why. And then, finally, he tells us about those who will be rewarded with the kingdom of God and why.

[11:14] Those three things. That's pretty basic outline of the passage. And we'll just take point number one this morning. So let's look at it. In the first story, Jesus reveals those received into the kingdom.

That's number one. Those received, or those who will be received into the kingdom. And it begins with verse 15. Then they also brought infants to him.

The New American Standard, and some of you have that translation, uses the word babies. And that's correct. That's what they were. The Greek word is *brephos*.

And it means newborn. It means infant. They were bringing infants and newborns to Jesus. Some of them may have been only days old, quite frankly. In fact, the word *brephos* can also be used to identify a baby in the womb.

Now, they weren't bringing those kind of babies to Jesus. But the word *brephos* can be used to reference an unborn baby. I think that's kind of interesting, by the way, just as a side note.

[12:22] A baby in the womb, not a fetus, okay? Wow. All right, so they brought infants, babies to him.

For what purpose? That he might touch them. Touch them. And what does that mean? Well, it just means to lay his hand on them and pray for them or bless them.

I mean, it's kind of like a baby dedication service here, gathered around Jesus Christ. And it was, by the way, a very common thing for Jewish mothers to do such a thing in that day.

They would bring their newborn children to an elder of the synagogue, perhaps, or a respected rabbi for him to lay hands on their newborn child and to bless that child.

And, you know, by the way, that kind of reveals, I think, a respect that most common Jews had for Jesus in that day, that they would bring their babies to him. All right, so these women are coming to Jesus, carrying their newborns, and seeking a blessing from Jesus.

[13:33] And what do the disciples think about all of that? Well, it's rather appalling, really, when we read it. The Bible says that when the disciples saw it, what did they do? They rebuked them.

That is, they're trying to send them away. There's no place for you here. By the way, the verb rebuked, not to get into the tall weeds of Greek, but it's a certain form that actually could be translated literally, they attempted unsuccessfully to rebuke them.

Now, it doesn't come out in any of the translations that I consulted, but it's a certain imperfect tense of a verb, and that's basically what it means. And really, when we hear that, we should not be surprised.

I mean, what, are you going to keep a bunch of mothers from bringing their babies to Jesus? I don't think you're going to be able to do that. And the disciples were not able, of course, to do that. But the fact that they tried to is a little bit disturbing to us.

All right? But why did they? Why did they try to send these mothers away? Now, the Bible doesn't mention mothers, but you don't bring infants without mamas.

[14:39] Mamas bring the infants. Why did they try to send them away? Well, we don't know. The answer is not given, and we can only guess about that. I think we could be right in our guesses. You know, perhaps Jesus is just too busy.

Too busy for such things, you know. Or he has more important things to do, you know, like, what? Make the lame to walk and the blind to see and, you know, and feeding 5,000 people with a little boy's lunch or casting out demons.

I mean, he's got a lot more important things to do than to bless a bunch of crying babies. Now, that's not what I'm thinking. That's what the disciples are thinking, okay? Perhaps that's it.

And, you know, speaking of that, you get a half a dozen or so babies together. We don't know how many there were, but you get, you know, at least two or more together. And you've got quite a racket, probably.

I can just only imagine. But now, having said that, the disciples' reasoning is really not important here. It's not important. What's important here is that it gave Jesus the occasion, the opportunity to teach this truth about the kingdom of God.

[15 : 53] And he took that opportunity, and that comes in the next two verses. So let's look at verse 16. Now, before we go to the next verse, a couple of things we ought to notice here.

Jesus, in this verse, uses a different word to refer to the children than Luke used in his narration in the previous verse.

I mentioned brephos. That's what Luke said. They were bringing infants to him. Brephos, newborns. But Jesus uses the more standard term, pideon, which means little child.

Now, it could refer to infants, but generally refers to little children in the sense of toddlers. We would call them toddlers. All right?

And so Jesus here is looking beyond just the babies that had been gathered around him at that particular time. And that's a clue that what Jesus is teaching goes beyond just little babies.

[17 : 15] And then, too, Jesus, and this is most important, Jesus did not say the kingdom belongs, quote, to these, end quote.

That's very important to notice. He did not say the kingdom of God belongs to these little children. He didn't say to these.

What did he say? He said to such as these. To such as these. And that is extremely important that we notice that. Because the meaning is this.

Little children, infants, toddlers, little children possess a common quality that is essential for entrance into the kingdom of God.

That's his point. An essential quality that's common to all little children that is absolutely crucial.

That is essential for one to enter into the kingdom of God.

[18 : 14] And it is this unique quality common to all children that any person, young or old, must have in order to be saved.

So that's why it's pretty important, isn't it? It's something we need to understand. Jesus said in verse 17. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.

Pretty clear, isn't it? Now, folks, he's not talking about children being saved here. It's not a text about child evangelism. It's not a text about children being saved.

Children are under the grace of God already. I really believe that. Until they're accountable at some point. Children are already in that sense saved. So he's not talking about children being saved.

So we don't apply what he says to children or child evangelism and so forth. He's not talking about children being saved. He's talking about you being saved. He's talking about you receiving his glorious kingdom.

[19 : 19] And you must receive it, he says, as a little child. As a little child. That is, with the same unique quality shared by all children.

This is very important. By the way, before we identify just what that quality is. Because I know you're sitting out there and you say, well, I already know what that is. But we'll see if you do. But before we talk about that.

I want you to notice the two references to the kingdom of God in verse 17. First, Jesus said, receive the kingdom of God. And then, in the very same verse, same sentence.

He said, enter. Receive the kingdom of God. Enter the kingdom of God. Two different ways to speak of that. And so, understand, to receive the kingdom of God is to respond in faith to its present manifestation.

That is, the gospel of Jesus Christ. To enter the kingdom of God is to take part in its future consummation. When Jesus returns.

[20 : 25] And the point is, right now, you receive the kingdom of God as a little child. And if you don't receive the kingdom of God right now as a little child.

Then you will by no means enter the visible, glorious kingdom of God when Jesus establishes it at his second coming. So, it is absolutely crucial, dear people, that we understand what it means, what exactly Jesus means, to receive the kingdom as a little child.

As a little child. So, what does it mean? What is that unique quality little children possess that is essential to anyone who would hope to receive and enter into the kingdom of God?

What is that unique quality that belongs to children? Well, is it humility? Is it humility? You know, just kind of the natural humility that you're kind of born with.

I don't think so. I mean, you know, most of you out there, a lot of you are parents. You have little children, some of you. And some of you, your children have grown up.

[21:40] But you remember what they were like when they were little. And I'd have to say that little children are not naturally humble. Are they? They're not even born that way.

In fact, from the very beginning, children are anything but humble. They are born prideful. Now, I'm sorry there's some kids in here, and I'm not trying to be ugly. But this is how we're born.

Prideful. Or to define it more specifically, self-centered. Now, I'm going to ask you. Are kids naturally self-centered?

They absolutely are. We don't really change when we become adults, do we? We just kind of discipline some of that out of our lives. We know what's appropriate, what's not. And, of course, hopefully, as born-again believers, we submit to the Holy Spirit and become self-giving and sacrificing and do away with self-centeredness.

But we never, ever escape that throughout our entire lives. But children certainly are self-centered. They are born thinking that the entire world revolves around them.

[22:48] And we kind of teach them that, too, don't we? Ever notice when you get together with a bunch of people and there's a little baby there? Maybe a little toddler, you know, down on the floor.

Have you ever noticed, even while you're talking, everybody's looking at that child? You know, the whole focus is on that cute little kid. And that's okay. So we kind of foster that, don't we?

But they're born with it. Thinking everything is about them. And they demand attention. And they demand it when? Right now.

Right now. They're going to throw a fit if they don't get it. They butt into conversations without any thought of considering other people who might be talking. And it's, you know, it's a kind of opportunities for us to teach that.

But this is the natural tendency of a child. So the quality that Jesus is speaking of here is not humility. Well, maybe it, and I've even read one commentator who put forth this possibility, that it is kind of a natural absence of materialism.

[24:00] You know, they're just not materialistic. They're not slaves now to the things of this world. They're not bought into that yet. They're not greedy for material things of life.

Are you kidding me? Listen, little children do not understand the concept of personal possessions and ownership.

Why? Because they think everything belongs to them. Right? Well, thank you, Albert. Appreciate that testimony back there. I mean, surely you have observed this as parents.

And some of you are not yet parents. Tony, Chris. You're going to see this very clearly. I mean, all you have to do is just get the kids down there on the floor, and the toys are strewn everywhere. And this is their philosophy. What's mine is mine, and you can't have it. And what's yours is mine, too, if I can get it. And I'll throw a fit if I can't. That's a natural thing for children.

[25:07] Now, again, it doesn't mean that we want to allow that, and we try as parents to teach our children to share and such. But they're not naturally sharing.

They like things, and they want things, and everything belongs to them. All right, so it's not that, certainly. That would not have been one of your guesses either, I'm sure.

Well, how about this one? How about honesty? Honesty. Well, I mean, you know, let's be serious here.

Kids are sometimes very honest. Most of the time very honest. I mean, they're brutally honest in the things that they say. Embarrassingly honest sometimes.

But that is not the virtue of honesty. We've got to understand the difference. Sometimes just plain rudeness is rudeness. Sometimes, you know, it's just ugliness.

[26:10] Kids will say things. You know, just openly, honestly about things, and they're just rude. At the very least, it's ignorance about appropriate things to say, and when to say them.

And that comes through what? Immaturity. All right, so this is not the quality. And surely, you know, you don't think children never lie. Do they?

Never lie? Well, I've caught our kids in a few lies over the years. Not going to give any specifics. Actually, I can't remember them.

Sherry could probably tell you. She has it written down in her book, in her brain. She just keeps all that stuff, and I don't. All right, so what is that unique quality that little children possess, possess in common, that Jesus says is essential to anyone who would hope to be received into the kingdom of God?

What is it? Is it faithfulness? I hesitate to, I'm not going to do a little survey, but I would imagine that many of us would say that's what it is.

[27 : 32] It's faith. And, you know, children are naturally trusting, aren't they? Right? I mean, they really are. I know some kids have kind of wired a little different, and they're kind of standoffish and shy and such, and I understand that.

But generally speaking, kids are pretty trusting. You know, they're trusting kind of by nature. And that's just a characteristic of little children.

Dear people, little children are naturally ignorant. Right? They're born that way. Ignorant. And therefore, what?

Gullible. Aren't they? Again, I have to apologize to our young people here. But, of course, really this applies to only the really little ones.

They're gullible. That's not the same thing as faith. It really isn't. Faith trusts the right things. And the right people.

[28 : 44] Faith distinguishes between right and wrong and true and false. And the supposed quality of faith we think we see in children is simply immature gullibility.

Their faith makes them believe in just about anything and anyone. And it's just natural, isn't it?

I'm not trying to identify, you know, bad things in kids. We're talking about a characteristic of children. And trying to discover just which characteristic is Jesus referring to.

And it's not faithful. Remember, Jesus is not talking about how children receive and enter the kingdom. We've got to keep that in our minds.

He's not talking about that. He's talking about how you and I must receive and enter the kingdom of God. And so what is that quality, that unique quality, common among all children, that Jesus says is essential to anyone who would desire or hope to enter into the kingdom of God?

[29 : 58] And here, I think, is the answer. Little children are helpless. They're helpless. Now, the older they get, the less they think that.

But remember, we're talking about little children. Infants, toddlers. They're helpless. Helpless.

That's what Jesus is talking about.

And there are a number of clues to this in the passage. This quality that is common among children. Clues that we can pick up on.

And there are three of them, actually. Let me give them to you. First of all, little children have no status of their own.

They have no status of their own. That is, they're helpless in their personal status. Now, when these mothers started bringing their babies to Jesus, the disciples did what?

[31 : 02] They rebuked them. Trying to send them away. And again, why? Because they thought this was no place for children. They didn't belong here.

Now, it's difficult for us to kind of get our brain around that. Because, you know, really, our culture is children-centric.

That is, everything centers on kids. And you know it's true. The society, in a sense, revolves around the children.

Parents are obsessed with their children. I'm not trying to, you know, be ugly about this. I mean, it's just who we are as a culture.

Kids are the center of it. And we also know it because advertisers focus on children. Marketers focus on children.

[32 : 00] They get you, mom and dad, to buy something through your children. And you know it's true. American culture is child-centric.

But in Jesus' day, it was not. Not at all. And that's why the disciples were basically saying, this is no place for children.

Don't bother Jesus with children. The things he is doing here, more important than children.

Someone as important as Jesus should not be taking his time, you know, his valuable time, blessing little babies.

That's basically what they're saying. And the idea is, they had no status before Jesus. No status whatsoever. That is, until, what?

Jesus received them. Jesus received them. Aren't you glad he did? Something else. Little children have no strength of their own.

[33:05] No status, no strength. Helpless in their strength. The Bible says in verse 15, they were bringing their babies to Jesus. They had to be brought.

They couldn't get there on their own. And what a picture of helplessness, really. And that is the quality that all children have in common. They cannot do anything for themselves.

They must have others do for them. They're helpless. They're helpless. And then one more. Little children have no service of their own.

No service. Helpless in their service. They can't serve anybody. They have to be served. But they can't serve anybody.

I mean, you know, no service certainly to the Lord. No works of righteousness. No reason why Jesus would receive them because of their, you know, valuable service to him.

[34:10] No works, good works at all. I mean, that is made quite clear. And really, this is where we need to connect this story with the one that follows.

And just compare the two stories in this regard, regarding good works. Jesus says to the little children, come to me and do not forbid them for of such is the kingdom of God.

And there's not a single, single reference to good works there at all. And then in the story of the rich ruler, Jesus says, you know, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Which means basically this rich man did not get saved that day. Did not get saved. He did not receive the kingdom. And yet this rich man had tons of good works.

I mean, basically, even though Jesus does poke some gargantuan holes in what he was commending himself for.

[35:19] He was a law keeper though. Had all kinds of good works. Yet, like this rich ruler, and here's what we need to see, need to understand.

Like this rich ruler, those who approach Jesus with their works cannot receive the kingdom of God. Cannot. Cannot.

I'm talking about any and all works. Even works that are manifest in our thinking and desires. We can even think of those as good works. You know, our desire to love and obey Jesus.

And our theology and doctrine, what we believe in. That's even part of those good works. And all the things that we do with our hands. Anyone who approaches Jesus on the basis of their works cannot receive the kingdom.

And therefore will never enter into it. But like the little children, those who approach Jesus without any works, none whatsoever, will receive the kingdom of God.

[36:20] And so Jesus is saying, you receive the kingdom with that same quality of utter helplessness.

And you know it. You know you have no status before him. None whatsoever with which to deserve entrance into the kingdom of God.

You know you have no strength whatsoever of your own with which to lay hold of or secure the kingdom of God. And you know you have no service whatsoever of your own with which to earn a place in the kingdom of God.

And it's on that basis that you must come. Same quality as a little child. So Jesus wants every one of us to know that you don't enter his kingdom by who you are or what you do.

You only enter his kingdom by who he is and what he does. The kingdom of God is only for those who enter that way.

[37:37] Thank you.