

Mark 10:13-16
"Of Such Is the Kingdom"
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When Mary and I got married, she was a Presbyterian by conviction and I was still a Baptist by conviction. I wasn't willing to reconsider my convictions on this subject. Also, since I was planning to go into the ministry, Mary agreed to follow me regarding our future church home. We eventually were members of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas.

Mary and I got married during my first year of studies at Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas. I remember one time when I was in the stacks at the Dallas Theological Seminary library where Mary worked, I noticed a book on the shelf that was a debate on the subject of infant baptism. I took the book off the shelf, opened it up at random, and began reading. On the page where I had opened the book, the defender of infant baptism was making his case. I saw quickly that he was arguing for infant baptism based on the fact that Jesus had at one time blessed the little children. I immediately closed the book, put it back on the shelf and thought to myself, "What in the world has Jesus' blessing the little children got to do with infant baptism?" I thought those few sentences I had read in this book were so off the mark that my reading any further wasn't worth my time. I left the library stacks that day more convinced than ever in my baptistic convictions regarding the proper subjects of Christian baptism.

Well, that was over thirty years ago, and here I am today baptizing a covenant child in infancy and preaching on Christ's blessing of

the little children. What has changed? The Biblical text hasn't changed. It still says exactly the same thing it said thirty years ago. What has changed are the eyes with which I read these words. What has changed is the mind with which I interpret those words. What has changed is the preunderstanding written on my heart through which I see those words just as surely as if this preunderstanding were a pair of spectacles resting on my nose. You see, here is the real challenge of interpreting the Bible. God has clearly given us His message in the words of the Bible. Now we must pray also for God to give us the eyes to see these words rightly. Now we must pray also for God to give us the mind to understand these words rightly. Now we must pray also for God to give us a heart that is open to the message that is there clearly spelled out before us.

Thirty years ago when I read these few sentences in this book about Jesus blessing the little children, my attitude was that only a straightforward, clearly direct statement from the Bible mandating infant baptism would be sufficient to change my mind on the subject. Now I understand that interpreting the Bible rightly is a bit more complex than that.

Over the years, one thing that has helped me to see this is to test my old standard of interpretation by applying it to other teachings. For example, practically all Christians believe that the Lord's Supper should be served to the women in the church as well as to the men. Yet there is no straightforward, clearly direct statement in the Bible stating this in no uncertain terms. One has to deduce this from the Bible's teaching about the status of women in the church and from the Bible's teaching about the purpose of the Lord's Supper. You can't go to a text which clearly teaches this by precept or example.

Another interesting example is found in the writings of John Bunyan, the Baptist minister who wrote the classic work **The Pilgrim's Progress**. He argued against performing a baptism as part of a Lord's Day worship service because there is nothing in the New Testament by way of example or precept which says we should do this. He also argued that people did not have to be baptized in order to partake of the Lord's Supper. I disagree with him on this, and so do most Baptists today. Other Baptists of his own day argued that a person had to be baptized before he partook of the Lord's Supper just as an old covenant Jew had to be circumcised before He was allowed to partake of the old covenant Passover. John Bunyan's response was that such thinking was uncomfortably close to the argument for infant baptism based on the practice of infant circumcision in the Old Testament. If the Old Testament practice of requiring circumcision before allowing someone to partake of the Passover implies that the a person under the new covenant should be baptized before he is allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper, then doesn't the old covenant practice of circumcising covenant children in infancy imply that covenant children under the new covenant should be baptized in infancy? John Bunyan argued that if we are going to be consistent, then we should accept both of these positions or neither of these positions. We should either accept both the baptism of covenant children in infancy and the requirement of baptism for partaking of the Lord's Supper, or we should reject them both. But we shouldn't accept one and reject the other. I think John Bunyan is correct on this point. He rejected them both, and I now accept them both. Yet many today reject one and accept the other, as I once did. Many today reject the baptism of covenant children in infancy and yet require baptism for partaking of the Lord's Supper.

It has helped me to apply the method of interpretation I was using regarding the subjects of baptism to other doctrinal and practical issues because doing so helped me see the inadequacy of that method of interpretation.

Let's get back to our text about Jesus blessing the little children. Thirty years I looked at this text and concluded that it does not teach infant baptism because there is no clearly stated and direct mandate here to baptize covenant children in infancy. Now I look at the text differently. I consider the teaching of the old covenant that covenant children were a part of God's covenant people. I consider the fact that under the old covenant, the males received in infancy the sign and the seal of the covenant, which in that age was circumcision. The New Testament teaches that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant in this age. This change is clearly spelled out in the pages of the New Testament. But does the New Testament anywhere clearly teach that covenant children are no longer members of the covenant community from infancy? Or does the New Testament give us indications that this principle continues in force in this age? You see, what has changed is the question I am asking of the text. Before, I rejected a principle or teaching unless I could find it clearly and directly stated in the New Testament. Now I am predisposed to accept a principle taught in the Old Testament unless the New Testament clearly sets it aside in this age. And if the New Testament gives me any positive indications that the Old Testament principle continues in this age, then that settles the matter definitively for me. And such hints regarding the status of covenant children under the new covenant are certainly found in the New Testament Scriptures, and our passage for today is but one of several.

There is also another consideration, a secondary consideration. I also now take into consideration the history of doctrine, what some call the general trajectory of the teaching of the church through the ages. The word trajectory refers literally to the path of a shell through the air after it has been shot from a cannon. Now the church is fallible, and its teachings at any point in history can be off the mark. Yet it is one thing to say that the trajectory of the church's teaching has strayed off the mark through the centuries. It is another thing to teach that the general trajectory of the church's teaching has been 180 degrees in error since the earliest days of its history. It is another thing to teach that the general trajectory of the church's teaching is not only off the mark but totally in the wrong direction altogether from the early years of its existence after the apostles. Admittedly the teaching of the church is fallible. The Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. The Bible alone is my final touchstone of truth. In that sense, I believe in *sola Scriptura*. Yet if the church in the centuries after the New Testament had a certain understanding of some doctrine, then I should take that into account in my own interpretation of Scripture. The teaching of the church through the ages is not infallible, but then neither is my own interpretation of the Biblical text. And I should remember and recognize that I am not the first or only person whom the Holy Spirit has illuminated in the understanding of the Bible. As a check on my own fallible interpretation, I should take into account the general trajectory of the church's teaching, especially in the early centuries after the age of the apostles, and I should take into account the specific interpretations of godly gifted theologians through the ages.

For example, the New Testament contains only a little information on the Lord's Day. The New Testament does reference the subject, but it doesn't say a whole lot. Yet the early church clearly

interpreted the term "Lord's Day" as a technical term for Sunday, the first day of the week, and clearly regarded the Lord's Day as the new covenant day of weekly corporate worship. I should take that into account when interpreting the New Testament references to the Lord's Day. This teaching of the early church is not my final touchstone of truth, but I should take it into account when interpreting what the Bible says about the Lord's Day.

Also, the church for centuries after the New Testament regarded the covenant children as part of the people of God and thus regarded them as candidates for baptism. I should take that into account when interpreting the New Testament's teachings on covenant children.

In review, I should study the infallible teaching of the Old Testament on subjects. I should look to the infallible teaching of the New Testament to see if there are indications that some old covenant practice continues under the new covenant or if there are clear statements that that practice changes under the new covenant. And I should also consider the general teaching of the early church as a significant though fallible factor in my study of the issue.

Let's now look at our text for today. I will be examining our text for today under three headings:

The Parents' Request
The Disciples' Rebuke
The Master's Reply

First, **The Parents' Request**. These parents brought these children to Jesus. Luke, in his account, specifically identifies at least some of these children as infants. These parents brought these young

covenant children to Jesus and asked Jesus to pray for them. They also asked Jesus for a symbolic gesture of blessing upon the children. They requested for Jesus to touch the children, to lay His hand upon them, which would symbolize the imparting of the spiritual blessing which Jesus would pray for. Now I think we all agree that at least some of these children would not understand either the prayer or the gesture. Remember, at least some of these children were infants. In fact, most of them and even all of them could have been. These children did not come on their own initiative. The parents brought them to Jesus. When Jesus touched them, this wasn't a magic touch which would automatically save these children. Jesus' touching the children by laying His hands upon the children symbolized a message, a message which probably was the subject of Jesus' prayer for the children. The laying on of hands symbolized the impartation of the Holy Spirit to work faith in the hearts of these children and thus to apply to them the saving power of Jesus' atoning work. This or something similar would be the blessing for which Jesus prayed for these children to receive. Over these years which followed this event, these parents would have reminded their children again and again about this significant event in their lives. After these children had reached the age of discretion, God could have used the memory of this event in the lives of those who had indeed come to faith as a means of strengthening and confirming that faith. This same principle is true with covenant baptism. Just as Jesus' touching these children did not automatically save them, neither do the waters of baptism work automatically. The waters of baptism do not save automatically and do not convey grace the way hot iron conveys heat, the way hot iron burns. Rather there is a symbolic message in the ritual of baptism just as there is a verbal message in the preached word. God uses the verbal message of the preached word to give, strengthen and confirm the gift of faith. God then uses the

symbolic message of the sacrament to strengthen and to confirm that faith. Just as Jesus prayed for the children when He laid His hands upon them, we pray when we administer the waters of baptism upon a covenant child. We pray that what is symbolized by the act of baptism with water may be realized in the life of the covenant child. The waters of baptism coming down upon a covenant child symbolize Jesus' pouring out the Holy Spirit upon that covenant child to work faith in His heart and to immerse that covenant child into a saving relationship with Jesus, into a mystical covenant union with Jesus. When we baptize a covenant child, we pray that this symbolized spiritual reality will indeed be realized at some point in the life of the child. Then God can years later use the message of the child's baptism to strengthen and confirm the child's faith.

Under the old covenant, we know that the covenant children were a part of God's people and that the males among them received the sign and seal of the covenant. If Jesus were going to change this old covenant principle that the covenant children were a part of the covenant people, this would have been the ideal time for Jesus to have done this. When these people brought these infants to Jesus, this would have been the ideal time for Jesus to make clear the change which was coming under the new covenant regarding covenant children. Jesus could have said that he did not want parents to bring their children to Him. He could have made clear that He was planning for covenant children under the new covenant to wait until what many today call "the age of accountability" before coming to Him. Jesus could have said that He did not want the covenant children to come to Him until they were able to come to Him on their own initiative. He could also have said that He did not want to make any symbolic gesture concerning covenant children until the covenant children were old

enough to understand for themselves the significance of that gesture. Jesus could have said that he certainly did not want to make any symbolic gestures when the covenant children were too young even to remember much less to understand what had happened to them. Jesus could have said that He did not want to lay hands upon the children until the children already had a faith which the symbolic message could strengthen and confirm at the very time it was done, that He did not want to make a symbolic gesture whose message would not strengthen and confirm faith until years later. If Jesus had plans to change the general old covenant trajectory on the status of covenant children within the covenant community, this would have been the ideal time to do so, but He did not.

Jesus did adjust the old covenant trajectory on some other issues, and he did indeed give some hints about what was coming during His earthly ministry. I am thinking about the inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom, the place of women in the covenant community, and the old covenant dietary laws. Jesus made a comment regarding foods and defilement which Mark's gospel interprets as purifying all foods. Jesus defended Mary's sitting at His feet to learn when her sister Martha objected. Jesus responded to the faith of a Roman centurion by stating that many would come into the kingdom from east and west. The New Testament epistles later infallibly taught these changes and explained their full significance. The teaching and practice of the early church also later gave them a real but fallible confirmation. Yet we find no such indications that the basic status of covenant children as members of the covenant community would change significantly under the new covenant.

We have considered the parents' request. Our second point is **The Disciples' Rebuke**. The disciples here underestimated the

importance of covenant children to the kingdom of God. They were probably thinking in terms of limiting their efforts to people who were able at that point in time to respond to the message of the kingdom which called for repentance. They were probably thinking about ministering exclusively to people who could join and promote Jesus' movement.

Perhaps the disciples also underestimated the importance of a symbolic act which, unlike circumcision, left no lasting mark. Someone once told me that he did not accept infant baptism because, unlike circumcision, the ceremony leaves no lasting mark. Well, neither does laying hands on someone, yet that did not stop Jesus from laying hands on these infant covenant children as an act full of meaning.

The disciples opposed the request of these parents and even rebuked them for making the request. They told them not to bother the Master. Yet Jesus thought otherwise. We read in Mark's account that the disciples' action toward these covenant parents displeased Jesus. Jesus objected to the disciples' acting as an obstacle to these covenant parents' efforts to bring their children to Jesus. This brings us to our third point, **The Master's Reply**. Jesus explained His attitude toward these covenant children by stating the basic principle, "Of such is the kingdom of God."

After Jesus made this statement regarding covenant children and the kingdom, He made another statement which defends its plausibility. Jesus went on to say, "Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." Jesus was saying that we shouldn't be surprised that covenant children are of the kingdom because one must become childlike in order to enter the kingdom. Entering the

kingdom is the language of salvation. As Jesus had said to Nicodemus early in His public ministry, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Entering into the kingdom is the inevitable result of the new birth. Jesus was here saying that one has to become in some way like a little child in order to be in the kingdom in the sense of having a saving relationship with Jesus.

Now in what sense does one have to become like a child in order to enter the kingdom? Jesus is not here referring to innocence because little children are not innocent. As David reminds us in Psalm 58:3, "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies." And as Solomon reminds us in Proverbs 22:15, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, ..." Little children are not innocent, but they are helplessly dependent upon their parents. This, I believe, is the point of comparison. In order to enter the kingdom, we must trust in Jesus. We must acknowledge our helplessness, and we must believe in Jesus with a childlike dependency. So if we have to become like a child in order to enter the kingdom, why should it surprise us that covenant children are of the kingdom?

Now Jesus is not here only saying that the child is an example for those who would enter the kingdom. Jesus is also saying that covenant children are actually of the kingdom. The same Greek word translated "of such" in all three synoptic accounts of Christ's blessing the children is also found in Acts 22:22 where the Jewish mob said concerning the apostle Paul, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!" Was the mob referring only to people such as Paul, or were they referring to Paul as well as all like him? Obviously the word included Paul. And when Jesus said regarding the covenant children brought to him, "Of such is the

kingdom of God," He wasn't referring only to adults with childlike faith. He was referring to the covenant children as well. Covenant children are of the kingdom in the sense that they are born into the covenant community and are a part of the church in its visible outward aspect.

So Jesus assures us that our covenant children are of the kingdom. And that is why we baptize them in infancy. We don't baptize our covenant children in order to make them a part of God's covenant community. We baptize them because they already are a part of God's covenant community.

It is indeed wonderful to know that our covenant children are little shoots on the olive tree of new covenant Israel and are not shoots on the wild olive tree of paganism. They are a part of that assembly which gathers on the Lord's Day to worship the living and true God, that assembly to which Jesus gave the promise that He would be there in their midst when gathered together in His name. They are there exposed to the means of grace, especially to the Word which is able from infancy to make one wise unto salvation. There the faithful pray for them and their salvation. There they are exposed to examples of genuine faith and sheltered from the evil company which corrupts good habits. We are grateful indeed for all these blessings and benefits, and we recognize their significance.

We also want our covenant children to possess the salvation promised, the salvation which belongs to those who meet the obligations of the covenant. We pray that God will work faith in their hearts and thus give them ears to hear and eyes to see. We pray that God will enable them to abide in the Vine and thus bear that spiritual fruit which gives evidence of spiritual life. We pray that the genuine faith which first dwelt in us will also dwell in

them. We pray with hope and expectation because the assembly of the faithful is where God often works in hearts and gives the gift of faith.

If you have not yet believed, even though you are a member of the church in its visible form; if you have not yet believed, even though you have professed to believe, our prayer is that God gives you the gift of faith. Our prayer is that God regenerates your heart and gives you that holy heart disposition which can do no other than respond to the Gospel message of Jesus in faith.

If you have believed, then our prayer is that God will use the Lord's Day worship with the Word and Sacraments to increase that faith. Our prayer is that your faith will increasingly bear the fruit of repentance and new obedience. Our prayer is that that this essential fruit of a faith relationship with Jesus will give you a growing assurance that your faith relationship with Jesus is genuine and your salvation is real.