



Let the children come to me

Mark 10:13-16

TITLE

Last week we examined some of the ways in which as God's people can be Jesus to families as we seek to reach out and be relevant to our community. Today we are going to look at issues surrounding children in particular.

But first let me start with a correction. Last week I said that families come in all shapes and sizes, not just the traditional "Happy Families" model. That's important to understand as church in the past was too often identified with the Happy Families model and people's lives just aren't like that any more – if in fact they were ever like that.

I also talked about dysfunctional families – families that for one reason or another don't function as a family which leads to all kinds of problems within that family. One or two people said that I had suggested that families that weren't the "Happy Families" model were dysfunctional families. I'd not intended to suggest that, so let me apologise if I confused you and say the following.

Just because modern families come in all shapes and sizes, it doesn't imply that they are dysfunctional. Families can be functional whether they be nuclear, extended, one-parent or step-families; and dysfunctionality can happen to any type of family, whether nuclear, extended, one-parent or step.

ITEMS

Which brings me to today's subject: children. Churches and individual Christians have taken responsibility for the teaching and encouragement of children associated with the church and the surrounding community from time immemorial. This has taken many shapes and forms – education, care for orphans, children's health, children's rights. When we see pictures of children suffering in East Africa, our hearts go out to them. Christians have always been right in the middle of relief, health and development issues.

TITLE

We have had some form of children's ministry here at MRBC since the inception of the church over 200 years ago. Why? Because all of us appreciate the fact that children need to learn about Christ in a way that is relevant to them, appreciating the fact that sitting with their parents in church can be a boring and demotivating experience for children even if it is encouraging or even exciting for their parents.

VERSE

Our motivation to have a ministry specifically for children has encouragement from Jesus Himself: *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."*

I remember in Sunday School we used to sing this song:

SLIDE

**When mothers of Salem their children brought to Jesus,
The stern disciples drove them back and bade them to depart:
But Jesus saw them ere they fled and sweetly smiled and kindly said,
"Suffer little children to come unto Me."**

I found the song a bit strange. It's one of those hymns that are written in a flowery Victorian poetic style which modern people find mystifying. Why should the disciples be thought of as cruel when they've given the children a lift home? Why did the children have to suffer to come to Jesus?

Another one we sang made more sense and grabs the essence of this passage. SLIDE

**Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
All are precious in His sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.**

People were bringing their children to be blessed by Jesus. We know from the passage that Jesus had no problem with that and the fact that plenty wanted to bring their children indicates how welcoming they found Him.

The disciples however didn't have that attitude and sent them away. Why? Because attitudes to children in those days were the same as in some parts of the world today. Up to the age of 12 children were just children. They were there but not being adults, were regarded, *particularly by men* as being there and mum's responsibility – certainly nothing to spend too much time taking seriously . So when some people wanted Jesus to bless their little offspring, the disciples rather rudely told them to get lost. Jesus was far too important and far too busy to be bothered with them: wasn't He?

No; "let the little children come to me". They were as important to Jesus as the adults. Our faith is not an adult faith, it is a children's faith too. In fact Jesus makes this amazing statement: *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."*

Many Christians like to make the faith as complicated as possible. But in truth it is so simple that even young children can understand it. Many of us like religion to be profound. If you want profound, there's plenty of it in the Bible – enough for a lifetime and more. But in truth, the most profound thing about the Christian faith is that to come into a relationship with Jesus, it's just simple and applies to all. It is about the trust of a child for a parent. It is that dependence that children have on their parents and if anything happens to that bond we all know how devastating that can be.

And Jesus points to childhood and says "we should all be like this". We need to recognise our dependence on God because child or adult we are all in the same boat and it's that simple trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord which is all that's needed to enter God's kingdom.

I became a Christian when I was 10, I know many that received Christ when they were younger. It was the same Saviour and same faith I entered into at 10 that I believe now. Trusting God doesn't change with age, just our knowledge and experience of life. This passage is a great reminder of the simpleness of trusting Jesus to those of us who are getting old and cynical. The dependence on God and the grace He shows me is the same as that when I was 10. In fact the great thing about working with children and youth is that their minds aren't filled with a lifetime of rubbish, which makes them far easier to communicate the things of God to. They also have an openness to the things of God that we often underestimate, because they approach the world with less baggage than adults.

So we have good reasons for wanting to teach children about Jesus from a young age – Jesus loves them and cares for them as much as anyone else. So as a church, we should regard them as important as we do anyone else.

I was privileged to be part of a Christian family as I know some of you were. Many of the problems we have today with reaching people for Jesus is that most do not have a Sunday School or club background and clueless-ness about the things of God is more common and we have to start our journey with them at a different point.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Last week talked about the importance of reaching families as families. That doesn't mean we abandon children's work. In the past we relied on children's work to bring the parents in. The danger in that is that we might use children's and youth work as a pretence to do something else. If you go grouse shooting, you'll bring back no grouse if you only shoot at ducks. I've found in my experience that doing children's work to reach adults unproductive at both levels. Children's work should have the spiritual needs of children at the centre of it, not a means to reach someone else. If we want their parents, then engage them – that's why we need to reach parents as part of families too.. We need both kinds of ministry, not one or the other.

BOTH KINDS OF MINISTRY NEEDED – because doing both actually helps our children's work.

- I mentioned that in the community there is suspicion of church by many. It is usually based on misconceptions about church. I hate to say it that the church generally haven't helped – maybe have even fuelled it. How do we start to dispel these? It needs to start with family stuff to develop a relationship with the adults – the parents. .
- the need for relevant ministry – the development level of children means that children and youth need ministry relevant to their age and ability. It needs to reflect their needs and culture. It's good

to do family events but when it comes to teaching and some aspects of worship, an adult environment is too heavy for them. That said, in children's work, the old formula still works remarkably well. Music, games, craft, story, quiz, memory verse.

- Further to the last point, we need to develop children's spirituality – children's work is not just humane containment or babysitting or teaching them Bible stories. We need to develop children's spirituality because they are as capable as adults of trusting Christ and therefore it goes without saying that they can worship, pray and the rest of it. So children need to become familiar with the Good News, the Bible, worship, and prayer. God can be real to them as to adults. They are as capable as adults of understanding all these things but how we teach them just needs to be relevant. Beware materials that teach moral lessons – they learn that at home or in school – we are here to bring them into a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

AN IMPORTANT MINISTRY

- AN AWESOME RESPONSIBILITY As a church we are responsible for teaching our children. If we don't they'll pick up the way of the world quickly and effectively. An effective children's and youth ministry can really help young people, particularly in their teens, usually because they of the social aspect of these activities and the friendships these build.

Actually Christian parents are responsible for encouraging their children in the faith too. Do we need help to do that – perhaps we can arrange a parents event?.

We need people to play their part in teaching children on a Sunday. Afraid you'll miss the sermon? It is recorded and the text online. The same applies to club work.

- A GOOD FOUNDATION– always a need on a Sunday. People make decisions to come to church on the basis of a Sunday school, because we want our children to grow up in an environment where they come to faith in Christ and where they might build the friendships and have activities that counters the draw from the world. We need to take this seriously – if we lay firm foundations then even if they suffer the age 16 drop-out (which we hope they don't), it's surprising how it all comes back at a later date.

To sum up, I've given you the benefit of over 30 years experience of working with children and youth in a church context. If you work with children here at MRBC and you either liked or disliked something I said, don't come and pat me on the back or tell me off, discuss amongst yourselves and let the Lord move you to shape the future of C-Kers as you will doubtless be preparing over the summer for the next academic year.

If you feel inspired and want to help – see Mick today. If nothing else it should be fun. But if you can't help then there's another important thing you can do – pray. Pray for our children, pray for our youth. Pray daily, pray for the ones you know by name. We are bringing them up in a society that the enemy will seek to draw them away from the Christian faith. Pray that this will not be the case. Pray for a vibrant children's and youth work here and in other churches in the town,

Prayer

*Preached by Mark Reid
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