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## BRINGING CHILDREN TO JESUS

Luke 18:15-17

By

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Luke Lesson 83

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In *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* (condensed in *Reader's Digest* [10/89], pp. 67-69), Robert Fulghum writes:

The cardboard box is marked "The Good Stuff." As I write I can see where it is stored on a high shelf in my studio. I like being able to see it when I look up. The box contains those odds and ends of personal treasures that have survived many bouts of "clean-it-out-and-throw-it-away." A thief looking into the box would not take anything—he couldn't get a quarter for any of it. But if the house ever catches on fire, the box goes with me when I run.

One of the keepsakes in the box is a small paper bag. Lunch size. Though the top is sealed with staples and several paper clips, there is a ragged rip in one side through which the contents may be seen.

This particular lunch sack has been in my care for 14 years. But it really belongs to my daughter, Molly. Soon after she came of school age, she became an enthusiastic participant in the morning packing of lunches for herself, her brothers and me. Each bag got a share of sandwiches, apples, milk money and sometimes a note or a treat.

One morning Molly handed me two paper bags. A regular lunch sack. And another with the staples and paper clips. "Why two bags?" I asked.

"The other one is something else."

"What's in it?"

"Just some stuff--take it with you." I crammed both sacks into my briefcase, kissed her and rushed off.

At midday, while hurriedly scarfing down my lunch, I tore open Molly's second bag and shook out the contents. Two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil

stub, a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, two Hershey's Kisses and 13 pennies.

I smiled. How charming. Rising to hustle off to the important business of the afternoon, I swept the desk clean. Into the wastebasket went my leftover lunch and Molly's junk. There wasn't anything there I needed.

That evening Molly stood beside me while I was reading the paper. "Where's my bag?" she asked.

"I left it at the office. Why?"

"I forgot to put this note in it." She handed me a piece of paper. "Besides, I want it back."

"Why?"

"Those are my things in the sack, Daddy, the ones I really like. I thought you might like to play with them, but now I want them again. You didn't lose the bag, did you, Daddy?" Tears puddled in her eyes.

"Oh, no," I lied, "I just forgot to bring it home."

"Bring it tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure thing—don't worry." As she hugged my neck with relief, I unfolded the note she had given me: "I love you Daddy."

I looked long at the face of my child. Molly had given me her treasures. All that a seven-year-old held dear. Love in a paper sack. And not only had I missed it, I had thrown it in the wastebasket. Dear God. I felt my Daddy Permit was about to run out.

Fulghum went back to the office and managed to retrieve the stuff before the janitor got to it. He returned it to his daughter, who carefully explained the significance of each item. He writes,

To my surprise, Molly gave the bag to me once again several days later. Same ratty bag. Same stuff inside. I felt forgiven. And trusted. And loved. And a little more comfortable wearing the title of Father. Over several months the bag went with me from time to time, though it was never clear

why I did or did not get it on a particular day. I began to think of it as the Daddy Prize and tried to be good the night before so I might be given it the next morning.

In time Molly turned her attention to other things, found other treasures, grew up. Me? I was left holding the bag. She gave it to me one morning and never asked for its return. I have it still.

Sometimes I think of all the times in this sweet life when I must have missed the affection I was being given. A friend calls this “standing knee-deep in the river and dying of thirst.”

So the worn paper sack is there in the box. Left over from a time when a child said, “This is the best I’ve got. Take it—it’s yours.”

I missed it the first time. But it’s my bag now.

Sometimes children can teach us some of the most profound lessons we need to learn as adults, if we’re listening and observant. That is true in this encounter between Jesus and the children. Luke puts it after the story of the Pharisee and the publican to show us, in contrast to the pompous Pharisee, the simple, humble trust that is necessary to enter the kingdom of God. There are five lessons we learn from this heart-warming exchange.

1. Children need to be brought to Jesus.

D. L. Moody once returned from a meeting and reported two and a half conversions. “Two adults and a child, I suppose?” asked his host. “No,” said Moody, “two children and an adult. The children gave their whole lives. The adult had only half of his left to give.” (In Kent Hughes, *Mark* [Crossway Books], 2:9.)

We all know that adults need to be brought to Jesus, but with children we tend to think, “They’re just kids. They’ve got plenty of time. Besides, how much can they understand? You can easily convince a child to say yes to the gospel, but how can you know if their conversion is real? Let’s concentrate on the adults.” But Jesus didn’t agree with that kind of thinking. He told the disciples, “Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

Studies show that the vast majority (90% or more) who trust Christ as Savior do so before age 20. That shouldn't make us stop trying to win adults to Christ, but it should encourage us to reach children. In Sunday School, youth club programs, and in "Five-Day Clubs," one of our main aims should be to see children come into a genuine saving relationship with Jesus Christ. They can understand the basic concepts of the gospel: sin, Christ's death in their place, and the need to trust in Him for salvation. Spurgeon says that we should be less inclined to doubt a child's profession of faith than an adult's, because the child is less prone to hypocrisy and he is less likely to have borrowed his words and phrases (*Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia* [Baker], 2:472).

When Jesus speaks here about receiving the kingdom as a child, He is not referring to the innocence of children. Children were not born in innocence and they are not without sin, even in their early years. Besides, innocence is not the qualification for entering God's kingdom. If it were, none of us could qualify. Children are born in sin and they need Christ as their Savior as much as any adult does.

I do not know at what age children become accountable before God. But I do know that they can genuinely respond to God's offer of forgiveness at an early age. I was three when I first invited Christ into my life. Whether I was truly saved then or not, I do not know. But I do know that God will work in the life of any child who realizes that he is a sinner and opens his heart to Jesus as his Savior.

How can we be involved in bringing children to Jesus? There are many ways, but let me mention two.

A. We can bring children to Jesus by living before them our own faith in Him.

These parents had to believe in Jesus personally in order to bring their children to Him. They would have had to buck the local chapter of Pharisees, who would have hindered them. But these fathers and mothers had enough personal faith to bring their children to receive this blessing from Jesus.

Someone once asked Albert Schweitzer how children learn. He replied, "Three ways. By example, by example, and by exam-

ple.” Children read our lives, not our lectures. That is not to disparage verbal instruction in the things of God. 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. We should read the Bible and pray with our families often. This requires turning off the tube long enough to get the family together for a few minutes of spiritual instruction!

But, in addition to verbal teaching, our lives must back up our words. Nothing will drive a child away from the faith faster than hypocrisy. I’m not talking about perfection, but reality with Christ. When we sin against our families, we should ask forgiveness. Our daily lives should manifest the fruit of the Spirit in our homes.

B. We can bring children to Jesus by actively working with children.

Let me be blunt: If you’re not serving the Lord in some capacity, you are too self-focused. God did not save you so that you could pursue a selfishly happy life. He saved you to serve in His kingdom. Although it is not always easy, and you don’t always see instant results, there is no more gratifying way to serve than to be involved with children. We usually do not have a waiting list for Sunday School, Children’s Church, and nursery workers! We also have Boy’s Brigade and Pioneer Girls on Sunday evenings. Our kids need men, not just women, as teachers and role models. Even with our toddlers, kids need to have men who will show them the gentle love of Jesus by playing with them and teaching them Bible stories. Many kids do not have their natural fathers living with them. You have the opportunity of showing these kids that “real men love Jesus,” as the bumper sticker says.

Before I leave this first point, I must disagree with Calvin (and many other usually fine expositors) who use this text to argue for infant baptism. There is not a drop of water in the passage. As Spurgeon puts it, “I might as well prove vaccination from the text” as infant baptism (“Children Brought to Christ, Not to the Font,” *Spurgeon’s Sermons* [Baker], 8:40-41).

According to the New Testament, baptism *follows* saving faith in Christ as a public testimony of that faith. I believe that infant baptism is potentially damaging, because it gives a false sense of

assurance to people who need to repent and believe in Christ. They think that since they were baptized, they will go to heaven, which is patently false. Personal faith in Jesus Christ is the only thing that saves.

The text does provide warrant for publicly dedicating children to Christ and for leading them to personal faith in Christ when they're old enough to understand. The word "babies" (18:15) generally refers to infants, but it can also refer to those old enough to understand teaching from the Bible (2 Tim. 3:15). The fact that Jesus here calls for the children shows that some were old enough to walk on their own. The parallel in Mark 10:16 shows that the purpose of bringing the children to Jesus was that He might lay His hands on them and bless them, not to baptize them.

2. We are in danger of hindering children from coming to Jesus.

The disciples were good men. They meant well. They probably thought that Jesus was too busy to deal with these children and that He had more important things to focus on. But they were wrong. If we're not careful, like the disciples, we can hinder children from coming to Jesus. I've already mentioned hypocrisy as a way that we hinder our children. Let me add two more:

A. We hinder our children from coming to Jesus if we do not consider them as important.

This was no doubt behind the disciples' actions. I'm sure that they liked kids, but they didn't think of them as being important. Jesus did. He saw them as important enough to stop whatever He was doing and to welcome them into His arms.

Evangelist Luis Palau tells of an incident during a crusade in Bolivia years ago when 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. At mid-morning, he was in the middle of a press conference in his hotel room when there was a knock on the door. A team member walked in with a small Bolivian girl, about eleven, who had seen Palau on TV and was anxious to talk to him.

Palau felt a bit irritated with the team member for bringing her into his room at a time like that, but he greeted the girl, 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 confidently, "But Mr. Palau, I really wanted to receive Christ into my heart." Luis was caught up short. He dismissed the newsmen, sat down, and led that little girl to Jesus. Later that day he led the president of Bolivia to Christ. Both appointments were significant.

- B. We hinder our children from coming to Jesus if we abuse them verbally, physically, or sexually.

This point does not come from our text and I wish I didn't have to mention it. But the sad fact is, even many professing Christians abuse their children. The Bible clearly forbids abusive speech (Col. 3:8) and commands us to use words that build up and encourage (Eph. 4:29). To scream in anger at a child, to call him names, or to use sarcasm and put-downs, is to sin. If you do such things, you need to repent and seek your child's forgiveness.

The Bible teaches that there is a proper place for spanking, but it is always sin to hit a child when you are not in control of your anger. We should never beat a child or to hit him in the face. A spanking should bring correction of rebellious behavior, not be a vent for a parent's anger. And, of course, there is *never, ever* a reason for sexual abuse! Christian fathers must never touch their daughters in inappropriate ways. Remember what Jesus said, that it's better to have a millstone tied around your neck and be thrown into the sea than to cause one of these little ones to stumble (17:2)!

- 3. Jesus teaches us that attitude and warmth are important in dealing with children.

These parents brought their children to Jesus so that He could touch them. Mark 10:16 says that Jesus took them into His arms and blessed them. The children felt comfortable with Jesus and Jesus felt comfortable with the children. Kids read your attitude, whether you like them or whether you think that they're a bother. By the warmth of our smile, the kindness in our eyes, and by appropriate touch, we open children's hearts toward the things of God that we need to teach them.

As you know, I put a premium on sound doctrine. But if you teach sound doctrine to children with a stern or gruff manner, you

might as well be teaching false doctrine, because the children probably will not accept it. If you teach Sunday School, by all means teach sound doctrine, but do it in such a way that the children *feel good* about God and about being in church. I realize that sometimes you must correct a disruptive child. But even then, the child needs to know that you are correcting him because you love him and want God's best for him.

The same thing applies in our homes. If we emphasize the rules and enforce strict discipline for any infraction, but our kids don't *feel* as if we love them *and like them*, they will be prone to rebel. The love of God in Christ is the biggest motivation to obey Him (Gal. 2:20). If our children feel our love, they will be motivated to obey us. If all they feel is our anger and that they are a bother, they will not receive our instruction.

#### 4. Children teach us how we are to come to Christ.

Whenever Jesus says, "Truly I say to you," He means, "Listen up, this is important!" By receiving the kingdom, Jesus means welcoming the kingdom by receiving the King. As we've seen, there is both a present and a future sense to God's kingdom. In the present, we enter the kingdom when we trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. In the future, we will live in His kingdom when He returns to reign on the throne of David over all the earth.

The disciples thought, "Children cannot come into the kingdom until they are grown ups." Jesus says, "Grown ups cannot come into the kingdom until they become like children." He is mainly referring to the fact that children are marked by receptive, simple trust, especially of their parents. Your kids will receive a gift that you offer them. If you offer your child an ice cream cone, he doesn't say, "I don't believe in ice cream." He doesn't say, "What's the catch?" He doesn't wonder if you might be poisoning him. He doesn't worry about the lack of nutrition or the fact that it may cause cavities. He doesn't feel like he has to pay you back. Your child trusts you and he instantly receives your gift and enjoys it.

Adults aren't that way. We're too proud or too skeptical to accept gifts. If someone gives us a gift, we feel uncomfortable unless we can even the score. Or, we wonder, "What's the catch? Nothing is absolutely free!"

The gospel is! God provides everything, all we can do is receive it in simple faith, just as children trustingly receive a gift from their parents. You can't offer to pay God back. You can only trust Him as a loving Father and receive the gift of eternal life that He provides through Jesus Christ. Learn from children how to come to Christ.

5. Learn from Jesus that He welcomes all who come to Him in childlike faith.

Just as Jesus called these children to Himself, He calls sinners to come unto Him. You may think, "Unlike these cute little kids, my life isn't so cute. I've really messed up! I've sinned terribly against God." But as we've seen throughout Luke, Jesus welcomed sinners who would repent and trust in Him. He called Levi, the greedy, despicable tax collector to follow Him (5:27). He told the immoral woman who anointed Him, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (7:50). Isaiah (42:3) prophesied of Messiah, "A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not extinguish." Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29). Come to Jesus as a little child, trusting in Him to forgive your sins. He will welcome you as He did these children.

## Conclusion

Luke wants us to see that ...

We must come to Jesus in childlike faith and we must help our children to do the same.

I read about a missionary to Africa back in the 1950's who was appalled when she saw the native children at recess not run and play, but rather hunt mice and grasshoppers. They would impale them on a stick and roast and eat them. When she inquired as to why the children were so hungry, she found out that in that culture, the men ate their fill first, followed by the women. If anything was left, the children could eat. The children were considered the least important in that society.

How unlike Jesus! He considered children important enough to give them His time and individual blessing. He wants us to learn

from children what it means to believe in Him. He wants us to lead children to faith in Him. I pray that if you have never done so, you will come in simple faith to Jesus as your Savior. I pray that many of you will commit yourselves to the important task of leading children to Christ. You will be doing a work that our Savior Himself counted important.

### Discussion Questions

1. Will too much love and tenderness spoil a child? Why/why not?
2. Does working with children in the church require a special spiritual gift?
3. Agree/disagree: Most Christian parents err on the side of too much discipline rather than too much love?
4. How can a person with intellectual questions develop childlike faith in Christ? Should he put his brain in neutral?

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