

## To Whom Does the Kingdom of God Belong?

Matthew 19:13-15

### Introduction

**How Would You Design a Savior?:** We like to think we are smart enough to design our own stuff (e.g., choose your own adventure; build a bear; design your own house). Recently, I was looking at some shoes I was considering buying and they had a “customize” option. Here’s where I’ve come to be, I trust the fashion sensibilities of Nike designers more than myself (or who knows what nonsense we’d end up with).

- If we designed a Savior, they would undoubtedly sound, look, or vote suspiciously like us (e.g., one thing that underscores the validity of Christianity is the fact that it runs counter to the culture of the times and is not a path to self-exaltation but, often, to suffering and sacrifice).
- Even the way we *read* the Bible is an act of discipleship. The goal of reading Scripture is to be conformed into the image of Christ but, if we’re not careful, through selective reading, we’ll try to mold him into our image. Don’t read the culture into the passage, but read the passage into the culture.
  - “Our natural intuition can only give us a God like us. The God revealed in Scripture deconstructs our natural preferences and startles us with one” of infinite perfection and grace (Dane Ortlund).

**Success?:** How do we judge success in God’s kingdom? Unfortunately, like Jesus’ first followers, we often have been discipled more by the standards of society than by the Savior. The result? We often look for the smartest, greatest, and biggest to be our leaders (cf. King Saul vs. David; the people wanted a king based on physical attributes). Or, maybe in our day and age we look for the most popular or influential. Maybe the leader with the most celebrity clout or social influence. **But the KoG prompts radically different questions.**

- I honestly think we have a real problem in modern American Christianity because we’re addicted to power and influence. As a result, we’ll often sacrifice the very things at the heart of discipleship in our quest to “win.” We give up holiness for influence, godliness for talent, and Christlikeness for temporary success.

I’ve seen scandal, after scandal, hit the Christian church. Leader after leader falling. One commentator, lamenting the failures of the charismatic church after a particular scandal said this: “We...are enamored with anointing than character. We run after healings and miracles, even if they are questionably manufactured. We chase gold dust, feathers, goosebumps, and smackdowns instead of holiness, biblical revelation, and true repentance. We are addicted to hype” (Grady). And I have to concur! While my tradition may be less obsessed with some of these particular novelties, I find we are similarly “addicted to the hype” of a charming and talented personality.

- What good is our worldly “success” if we don’t champion and replicate the values of God? What happens if we are successful at the wrong things? What if we evangelize and disciple folks into a false gospel that still masquerades under the banner of Christ?

- If that happens, all we produce are weak and anemic folks waving the banner of Christ but denying him by their lives. “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matt 23:13-15).
- What we win people with and call them to is what we replicate; we need to be careful to replicate disciples of Jesus!

### Kingdom Values:

- Next week: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt 19:30).
- “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27).
- “But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Apparently, God has designed his kingdom to value service rather than strength, dependence rather than autonomy, weakness rather than power.

- Do you want to join the military? Well, guess what, you might not be allowed to. The military has standards, you have to be a certain age (17-34), certain weight, certain mental acuity, medically fit, and so on. They won’t enlist you unless you are “fit.” “The difference between Uncle Sam and Jesus Christ is that Uncle Sam won’t enlist you unless you are healthy and Jesus won’t enlist you unless you are sick. What is God looking for in the world? Assistants? No. The gospel is not a help wanted ad. It is a help available ad. God is not looking for people to work for him but people who let him work mightily in and through them” (Piper).

We learn that Jesus values people that the world often considers insignificant. We, as his people, should value the same things. To illustrate his point, Jesus returns to a **recurring theme** of children and their place in God’s economy.

<sup>13</sup> Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, <sup>14</sup> but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” <sup>15</sup> And he laid his hands on them and went away.<sup>1</sup>

**1. The Misunderstanding of the Disciples (v. 13)** <sup>13</sup> Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people,

<sup>1</sup> <sup>13</sup> Τότε προσηνήχθησαν αὐτῷ παιδία ἵνα τὰς χεῖρας ἐπιθῆ αὐτοῖς καὶ προσεύξηται· οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐπετίμησαν αὐτοῖς. <sup>14</sup> ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν, Ἄφετε τὰ παιδία καὶ μὴ κωλύετε αὐτὰ ἔλθειν πρὸς με, τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν. <sup>15</sup> καὶ ἐπιθεὶς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτοῖς ἐπορεύθη ἐκεῖθεν.

**Kissin' Babies:** In the midst of Jesus' teaching and ministry, parents are bringing their children to him. Kissin' babies has been a staple of presidential campaigns since the mid to late 19th century. One magazine in 1886 said most presidents of the United States had accepted "kissing babies as an official duties." So presidents travel around shaking hands and kissing babies (don't get these mixed up!). Why do presidents do this? It makes them seem down-to-earth and trustworthy. If a mom would trust a president with their child, then they must be trustworthy (there's something there, but we'll get back to that in a minute). There's a big difference, though. Politicians are kind to children to gain support, respect, and votes. Jesus is kind to children in a time and culture where children were not a means to social credibility. Kindness to children was a liability to Jesus.

**Parent's Desire:** Despite the cultural position of children, the one place where a child should be valued is in their home with their parents. And, these parents want Jesus to bless their children (lay his hands on them and pray). Whether they fully "get" who Jesus is or not, they know there is something special and unique about him.

- A lot of times we are disciplined by our culture into a false theology of parenting and child-rearing. What do you want for your kids? It is good to want them to learn and grow and succeed, but we have to give them every opportunity to succeed at what really matters. It doesn't matter how many straight A's your child gets, or how far they can throw a football, or what college they go to, if they don't know Jesus. **What does it look like to love your children? It looks like taking them to Jesus.** A godly parent can't make their child love Jesus but they can make it easier to believe in Jesus.
- Raising a child "religiously neutral" is neither possible nor kind. Why would you withhold grace and guidance to your child? Why would you keep them from Jesus?

**Silly Disciples, Jesus is for Kids:** The disciples (again) miss the point despite the fact that Jesus has already used children as an illustration for the kingdom and explicitly said, with a child standing in front of them: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matt 18:5).

- You and I are **not** the heroes of the story. As Jesus' disciples, we find ourselves often missing the point and needing his gracious correction. We get our priorities misplaced, we forget what we know and have been taught. **Being a disciple means being wrong sometimes and getting rebuked by Jesus.** We need Jesus to graciously (but firmly) remind us.
  - Life Rule: Sometimes you're wrong! An inability to admit you're wrong, to change your mind, is a sign that you are trying to be god of your own life. Trusting God means you can be humble enough to not always have to be right.

**Rebuking the Rebukers:** The disciples rebuked the people. For some reason, the disciples think these parents are wrong for bringing their children to Jesus. Maybe Jesus is **too important** or **busy** and children are **too unimportant** and **disruptive**.

- Mark gives us a glimpse of Jesus' feelings toward the disciples' behavior: "But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant" (Mk 10:14). He is annoyed and frustrated at the

mistreatment of these people by the disciples. But in all the accounts of this story in the gospels, Jesus corrects the disciples' mistreatment by teaching them the values of his kingdom and demonstrating them through his action.

At the core of Jesus' character is a heart for the hurting and compassion for the downtrodden. He is never too busy for you.

- Unfortunately, I've seen pastors get this wrong too (cf. not every emergency is an emergency), sometimes you can't have me but you can always have Jesus (he's always there). But, I've seen Pastors who are afraid to give out their phone number, or you have to e-mail secretaries to get ahold of (*contra* scholars who respond ASAP). We're not Jesus. We have to sleep. We have limited capacity. We make mistakes. We sometimes get too busy. But, like Jesus, you are not an inconvenience to us.

**Who is Jesus For?:** Think about a Doctor or a medical specialist. They've gone to school for a long time, they're very educated. They make good money and are very important. What if a doctor said, "I'm too busy and important to see sick people. I'm too good for them." No! All their education, experience, and intelligence is for the purpose of helping the sick. A good doctor is glad when someone who is sick comes to them so they can help! Jesus isn't too busy or holy for you, he came for the purpose of saving us. He loves when we come to him. We are not an inconvenience or bother.

In 2 Kings 5, there's a story of a little, Hebrew slave girl and a Syrian army general. He was a powerful and important man. One day he contracted leprosy and in his distress was looking for a cure. Here's how *The Jesus Storybook Bible* paints the scene and summarizes the story: little girl, despite the fact that this general is her enemy: There was a little slave girl who worked for Naaman; she knew someone who could help him. But Naaman was her enemy. He had led an army raid on her home in Israel. He had killed her whole family, carried her off to Syria, and made her into his slave. Every night she cried herself to sleep – she had lost everything. We don't know why she, of all people, would want to help Naaman. Why did she want him to be well rather than punished? Why did she help, rather than hurt? In any event, she told him of a prophet in Israel named Elisha who could heal him. So Naaman loaded up his wagons, put on his armor, took a lot of money and went to the King of Israel. When he arrived, he announced: "My healing, please!" The Israelite king fearfully replied, "I can do lots of things but only God can heal." But the prophet Elisha knew what was happening and sent word to the king, telling him to send Naaman to him. So Naaman hurried off to Elisha's house. But Elisha didn't even come out and greet him, he just sent out a servant. "Doesn't Elisha realize who I am?," Naaman thought. But what the servant said next made him even more angry. "Wash in there!" he said. "Just wash?" Naaman laughed, "in that slimy, stinky river?" Was this some kind of joke? It wasn't. "Any person can wash in a river!," he thought. "I am Naaman. I am important. I should do something important so God will heal me!" And he rode off in a rage (of course, you and I both know, that's not how God does things; **all Naaman needed was nothing, it was the one thing Naaman didn't have**). God knew that Naaman was even sicker on the inside than he was on the outside. Naaman was proud. He thought he didn't need God.

- Jesus did not come for the healthy, but the sick. Jesus is not available to the powerful but to the weak. "Jesus loves all the wrong people. People who can offer him nothing."

People who cannot love him the way he loves them. People who [often] hate him. He doesn't seem hindered at all by their lovelessness or their unloveliness" (Jared Wilson). Jesus doesn't need you to get your act together and figure it all out before you come to him, in fact, in your weakness he is calling you to **abandon all pretense of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency and depend completely on him.**

**2. The Welcome of Jesus (v. 14a)** <sup>14</sup> but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them,

**Why Children?:** Back to the point: why are children such a powerful example of these spiritual truths? Referring to the beginning of chapter 18: "In the honor culture of the first century, children were considered as equal to slaves in status. Therefore, by placing a child before his disciples as the 'greatest' in the Kingdom of heaven, Jesus subverted the social standards of identity and worth. His disciples had to change the way they saw themselves and 'become like little children'" (Reeves).

- Something about being a child strikingly illustrates the model of true discipleship and community that Jesus is trying to teach. Children, in that day and age, were supposed to obey, work hard, and stay out of the way.

And, let's be honest, often times we treat kids as potential value for the future rather than valuable today (cf. teenagers are a rough draft of a human; if it was an assignment you wouldn't fail but you'd get an incomplete; I was a youth pastor and middle school boys sometimes smelled sour "like an applebee's dumpster;" look like a giant baby with a mustache; already/not yet; not babies but not adults; no longer cute but not yet useful).

**At Least Children:** If we are going to embody the care of others that Jesus calls us to, then a good diagnostic question is this: "How do you value and treat kids? In Jesus' mind it doesn't matter how big and powerful we are if we mistreat or ignore a child" (Hanevich).

- Pastor kick out a crying baby? No.
- If I can't trust you with my kids, then I can't trust you.
- Men: Childcare and spiritual instruction in the home and in the church is not only a woman's task.
- At the very minimum, if we are going to follow Jesus, then our homes and churches must be safe places for kids: physically, emotionally, and physically (*contra* abuse, coverup, worried about reputation more than safety and justice).

**What Does It Look Like to Hinder Children?:** Do not hinder them. The disciples are *literally* preventing these children from coming to Jesus.

- We hinder children from coming to Jesus when we fail to teach them about the Savior.
- We hinder children from coming to Jesus when we treat them like a spiritual inconvenience rather than a spiritual opportunity.
- We hinder children from coming to Jesus when we fail to model the gospel for them through our lives (not by pretending to be perfect but showing your weakness and dependence on God).

- We hinder children from coming to Jesus when we don't pray with them, when we play church each week but fail to follow Jesus with all of our lives.

**3. The Values of the Kingdom (vv. 14b-15)** for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>15</sup> And he laid his hands on them and went away.

**To Such Belong:** To whom does the KoH belong? To such. Jesus is using children again as a metaphor for those who are in the kingdom. Who gets in? Only those who are children of the king.

- God, our Father and King, is the only reason any of us make it into the kingdom. Our relationship with God should be like a child with a perfect father (e.g., trusting, dependent, joyful, loving, obedient, etc.).

This is so counterintuitive to the world's way of thinking. The natural mind cannot comprehend this. In our flesh, we think we must earn our way into the kingdom (religion) or we must build our own kingdom (rebellion). But Jesus makes it clear that entrance into his kingdom only comes from *new birth*. And that is outside of our control. Who planned their own birth? 😊

**Value Insignificance:** We need to reflect the kingdom values of humility and dependence, where we value those who seem insignificant to the world, where we recognize our own weakness and rely on God's provision and strength.

- There are no great ones in the KoH except Jesus. “A portrait of the church emerges [in the Gospel of Matthew] as a place where status-consciousness has no place. The focus is on the relationship and mutual responsibility of all members of the community. Jesus gives to the least important person a significance out of proportion to their human standing. The last is indeed first” (France).
- The disciples are concerned about their *rank* in the God's Kingdom. They want power, authority, and status (and presumably all the rights and privileges thereof).

**Pastoral Illustration:** In Gregory the Great's *Book of Pastoral Rule*, he discusses pastors holding in tension the desire to be a leader and the fear they should have of being a leader. He compares **Isaiah** (“here am I, send me”) and **Jeremiah** (reluctant prophet). The two provide a good balance: compelling call and insurmountable task; completely humble and completely confident.

- “Jesus cares more about your character than your spiritual resumé” (Hanevich).
- I care more that pastors have proven character than some subjective belief in their own calling. I want to see that they love the church, teach the Scriptures well, serve with conviction and gentleness, than that they “feel” called.

**Beatitudes:** We've seen this before in Jesus' description of his Kingdom during the sermon on the mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5:3, 5). The kingdom of God is for those who recognize their spiritual poverty. When you truly understand the gospel you are keenly aware of your inability to save yourself. You approach God and others with humility, without pretense, with no illusion of self-sufficiency.

- “Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread” (D. T. Niles). In the same way that salvation requires you admit your inability to atone for your sins, living the Christian life requires the same. The grace that saves is the grace that sustains. The one thing you need to be saved is “nothing” but admitting that is often the hardest part.

- A hallmark of a true disciple is humility. But by admitting our shortcomings and depending completely on God, he graciously reigns in our lives now and promises an eternal home with him in heaven.
- This affects the way we treat others: “We look down on others because we are not looking up at God” (Sally Lloyd-Jones).
- Humility is *essential* to receive our inheritance from God because we inherit based on Christ, not our own strength. We get into the kingdom **in our weakness** but Christ’s strength!

## Conclusion

Weakness is a feature of discipleship, not a bug. “Every other religion and philosophy says you have to do something to connect to God; but Christianity says no, Jesus Christ came to do for you what you couldn’t do for yourself. So many systems of thought appeal to strong, successful people, because they play directly into their belief that if you are strong and hardworking enough, you will prevail. But Christianity is not for the strong; it’s for everyone, especially for people who admit that, where it really counts, they’re weak. It is for people who have the particular kind of strength to admit that their flaws are not superficial, their heart is deeply disordered, and that they are incapable of rectifying themselves. It is for those who can see that they need a savior, that they need Jesus Christ dying on the cross, to put them right with God” (Keller). The kingdom belongs to “such as these” (i.e., weak ones who trust a great God).

- Living a humble life might be the most countercultural thing you can do.
- True joy is found in depending on and trusting in him.

(1) Climb in the lap of the Savior and rest. You’re his child. You don’t need to prove anything.

(2) Value those that the world might seem as unimportant.

(3) Pursue insignificance rather than power. It’s better to give than to receive. It’s better to serve, than be served.