



WESTMINSTER  
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# Let the Children Come to Me

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:13-15).*

It's been a big week for children here at Westminster. Barefoot School, our vacation Bible school, had more than 200 children and 100 volunteers in a program that ran all morning long, Monday through Friday, where young people learn about Jesus and what it means to be a faithful Christian in this world.

The children ranged in age from preschool to sixth grade, and besides all the adult volunteers, a large number of teenagers were team leaders and helpers. It was a wonderful example of how the church cares about children, and the whole church family gathers to love and support and teach these little ones all year long. It's just what we do as part of the family of God.

Bible school was the major focus here last week, but we also celebrate baptism this morning for one of our newest little members, and my own grandson was baptized yesterday at his parents' church in the North Hills. All these things remind us that children have been central to Christianity ever since parents started bringing their little ones to see Jesus himself.

As Mark tells the story, Jesus' disciples seem to have missed the message at first. People come and try to put their children in front of Jesus, just so he might touch them and bless them, and maybe even heal them. But the disciples try to shoo the parents away, apparently thinking Jesus has more important things to do than to care for little kids.

But Mark says Jesus is not happy when he sees what his disciples are doing. The Greek word he uses to describe Jesus' reaction is *aganakteo*. If you listen closely, you can hear something like our word "agony" in the sound. English translations say Jesus was "indignant" or "angry," but the tone of the Greek is the sort of outrage we feel when our sense of right and wrong has been violated.

It's in that tone of voice that Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me. Don't stop them! The kingdom of heaven belongs to the likes of these. And by the way, anyone who does not receive the kingdom like a little child will never enter it." Then Jesus takes the children up in his arms, and lays his hands on them, and blesses them.

What do you suppose Jesus means when he says we have to enter the kingdom like a little child? The point is not that Jesus idealizes children, the way we often do in our own culture. It's not just that children are so innocent, because anyone who's spent any time with children knows they need to be taught to look beyond their own immediate impulses and desires and learn to think about other people too. No, what Jesus means has more to do with a willingness to be taught and led, to trust that a loving parent, or a loving God, is looking out for us, to keep us safe and guide us, and lead

us in ways that will help us to grow and flourish and live as God would have us live.

We grownups often live as though we could get along fine without relying on God, or obeying God. We have our own interests and inclinations, our sense of what seems right and wrong to us. Truth be told, we'd just as soon leave God out of our decision making sometimes, since we already know what we want; or if we bring God into the picture at all, it's often by way of attributing to God ideas and attitudes that bear a remarkable similarity to our own.

Jesus is on to that, though, which is why he's so indignant when his disciples act as if they know what they're doing, and attribute their own motivations to him, when in fact they really don't understand what Jesus wants. It's fitting, then, that this story of Jesus and the children should come up in a week when we've been thinking about children in so many ways—in Barefoot School, in baptisms, and in the way some children turn up uninvited and unwelcome at the border of our country.

Unless you've been in another country this week, you've probably followed at least some of this story. And even if you were out of the country you may well have heard about it, since the situation is being watched literally all around the world.

The details are rather complicated, but the nub of the problem can be described straightforwardly. The current Administration in Washington has decided to adopt a “zero tolerance” policy for people coming across the border without proper credentials, arguing that they've broken the

law and therefore should be treated as criminals. Children may not be incarcerated with their parents, and the courts have said that children whose parents are incarcerated may not be held for more than 20 days before being placed in foster care or some other setting more conducive to their care.

The Administration has been confining any adults who cross the border without proper papers, separating them from their children, and sending the children to other facilities—according to many reports, often not telling parents where their children are, or when they might expect to see them again. On at least some occasions, parents may have been told that they could be sent out of the country without their children. All of this, the Administration says, is just a matter of obeying the law and keeping America safe.

There are a number of problems with the Administration's approach, though, according to critics from across the political spectrum, including both major parties, and a large number of religious, humanitarian, and medical organizations. They point out that neither of the last two Administrations, one Republican and one Democratic over the course of sixteen years, found it necessary to enforce the law in this way. They say the executive branch has some discretion in how the law is implemented; and in any case, if the way the law is written leads to inhumane outcomes, an obvious solution is to change the law, which Congress could do at any time.

The whole situation has turned into yet another partisan political football, and some remarkably callous and thoughtless things have been said in the course of the public

arguments. One well-known commentator on a widely-watched cable network said last week that kids are being separated from their parents and “temporarily housed in what are essentially summer camps,” while another popular pundit on the same network referred to migrant children seen in video footage as “these child actors weeping and crying on all the other networks 24/7 right now.”

Another striking aspect of all this has been the way some members of the Administration have used the Bible to defend their policies. I’m not an expert in immigration law, but I do know something about the Bible, having been a minister for 40 years, and I have a Ph.D. in history and policy, so I know a bit about those things too. They quote Paul’s comment in Romans 13:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

Paul’s basic point is that civil government, in principle, can be a legitimate way for God’s will to work in this world. The history of Christianity is full of different interpretations of how civil authority might work in practice, including when it should be obeyed and when it should not. The earliest Christians would not, for example, worship the emperor, even if the law required them to, and for their disobedience some of them went to their death.



Our own country's independence, of course, began with episodes like the original Tea Party, when colonists dramatically disobeyed the British government's law that put a tax on tea by dumping the tea into Boston Harbor. We celebrate a long tradition of civil disobedience against unjust laws in this country, as when, sixty-some years ago, the laws of Alabama and other states prohibited black people from sitting in the front of a bus, or swimming in public pools, or eating at public lunch counters. In those days lots of white, church-going Christians cited Paul's letter to the Romans by way of defending segregation. It's the law, they said, and the Bible tells us to obey the law.

Christian history has countless examples of people conjuring up prooftexts from the Bible to defend unjust laws or inhumane interpretations of the law. That's especially ironic, given the way Jesus is described in the gospels. Jesus heals the sick on the Sabbath, and his disciples pluck some grain to eat on the Sabbath when they're hungry, and then some of the scribes and Pharisees start conspiring to trap and eventually kill Jesus, precisely because, they say, he's violating the law. But Jesus distinguishes the letter of the law from the spirit of the law, over and against those who invoke the letter for unjust ends. And Jesus famously says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith."

And then, of course, there are the children themselves. The New Testament refers to people of faith in general as children of God, and everything we know about Jesus' treatment of children points to nothing but tenderness

and affection and care. Some of us were taught to sing in church when we were young:

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

Can anyone seriously imagine Jesus tearing children away from their parents for the crime of fleeing terrible conditions at home in order to seek a safer place and a better life—even if they disobey the letter of the law? Maybe many of these people need to be sent away; that’s a question for another day. But even if some of these migrant people need to be turned around and sent home, what Christian who takes the Bible seriously and knows the heart of Jesus would subject children to such traumatic treatment in the name of law and order?

And it is traumatic for the children. As it turns out, there was even a Westminster connection to the story this last week. A member of our church, an elder currently serving on our Session, is a professor of pediatric nursing and past president of the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners. In that capacity, Susan Van Cleve was invited to Washington to speak about the potential long-term physical and emotional effects of the “toxic stress” that can result when children are separated from their parents. The consequences are quite real, and they are entirely unnecessary. There are better ways to enforce the law.

A great nation can protect its borders, manage immigration lawfully, and still be humane in its treatment of people who seek a better life. We've done it before, we can do it again, and we must. Every single one of us here today is a descendent of immigrants; and why did our ancestors come to this country, if not to find a better life for themselves and their children? We can find a better way to treat other people who want to come here, too, even if we need to turn some of them away, and compassionate Christians need to urge our elected officials to do that now. That's how Christian moral commitment plays out in a democratic society.

I know some people don't like to hear us talk about such things in church. Some think Christianity is only about getting individual souls to heaven, and some just want to come to church for an hour on Sunday without having to think about what goes on in the world, with all its conflict and confusion. I understand that, and I'm even sympathetic.

But just read the Bible, and listen to Jesus, and you'll see that biblical faith has never looked the other way when people are suffering. All through the Bible, people of faith are called to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. We gather here in church, not to escape from the world, but to learn what it means to be faithful to God; and we leave to reflect God's love in a world that desperately needs to see such love. That's why God calls us here, so let's go out and be faithful to our calling when we leave this place.



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