

Child-Like Faith
(Mark 10:13-31)

3.18.18

Receiving vs. Achieving

Near the end of Romans 9, the apostle Paul diagnoses the root problem beneath Israel's rejection of the gospel of Christ.

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written,

*“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”*
(Rom. 9:30-33)

The difference, says Paul, between those Gentiles who were saved, who entered the kingdom of God and inherited eternal life, and those Israelites who were not saved and are forever excluded from the kingdom of God, lies in the way each responded to the law of righteousness. In other words, when the righteousness of the law was revealed through the preaching of Paul and others, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit convinced the consciences of men that they fell short of God's righteous requirement and were liable to His judgment, the Gentiles and the people of Israel reacted in two vastly different ways. The Gentiles, who did not have access to the written law, felt very deeply their helpless estate, and upon hearing of the free gift of justification through Christ and having no other recourse but to cry out for mercy, they embraced Jesus as their only hope of righteousness. The Jews, on the other hand, who had the written law, responded either by denying that they, in fact, fell short of God's righteous law, or else they redoubled their efforts at keeping the law in hopes of attaining to the required standard. The Gentiles *received* the righteousness of Christ by grace through faith as a gift (Rom. 3:24), and they were justified before God. The Jews sought to *achieve* righteousness through keeping the law, choosing rather to believe that justification was based upon one's own works and efforts. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, that rock of offense which is Christ and His gospel.

These two paths of pursuing righteousness – that of *receiving* the righteousness of God as a gift through faith, and that of *achieving* the righteousness of the law through works – represent two ways of pursuing entrance into the kingdom of God and eternal life. And these same two paths are laid out before us in this morning's passage from Mark 10:13-31. Just as Paul set the Gentiles who received righteousness and Jews who sought to achieve righteousness in opposition to one another, so Mark sets the children (those with child-like faith) who *receive* the kingdom of God and the rich man who sought to *achieve* the kingdom of God in opposition to one another. And the result is the same. The child-like enter into the joy of their Father's kingdom, while the rich man stumbles over the rock of offense and turns away in sorrow. This morning, with God's help, I will lay before you these same two approaches to God – one ending in everlasting joy, the other ending in everlasting sorrow. May God grant us the humility and helplessness of children, that we may become heirs of eternal life and of the Father's everlasting kingdom.

Two Stories, or One?

Before we begin, I want to briefly make the case that this entire section is intended to be read as one unit, presenting two vastly different approaches to the kingdom of God. That is, the passage about Jesus and the children is not intended to read apart from the passage about the rich young ruler, nor is the passage about the rich young ruler to be read apart from the passage about the children. Each one informs the other. I have four lines of evidence that Mark 10:13-31 is, in fact, one single passage.

1. All three synoptic Gospels place the two accounts together, the rich young ruler immediately following the children (cf. Matt. 19:13-30; Luke 18:15-30). I would think differently if these passages occurred in different contexts in different Gospels. But clearly, all three evangelists considered the two stories to be linked.
2. Both passages are concerned with who will inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to “such as these” (i.e. children), and that unless one receives the kingdom of God like a child he will not enter it at all (10:14-15). Likewise, the rich man comes to Jesus asking how to inherit eternal life (10:17). And when Jesus interprets for the disciples what they have just witnessed, He says, “How difficult it will be for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (10:23, 25). The disciples understand what is at stake, for they respond by asking, “Then who can be saved?” (10:26). At stake in both passages is the kingdom of God, eternal life, and salvation.
3. In v. 24, Jesus refers to the disciples as “Children” (Τέκνα), the only place in all of the Gospels in which Jesus refers to them in such a way. In fact, the only other person whom Jesus addresses as “Child” (“Son” in ESV) is the paralytic in Mark 2:5, who also displays a very child-like (i.e. humble and helpless) faith in Christ.
4. The last verse in the passage (Mark 10:31) makes the best sense if the passages are understood together. The “first” who will be last is the rich man (and those like him), while the “last” who shall be first are the children (and those with child-like faith).

Therefore, the main point of this entire passage (10:13-31) can be summed up in v. 15:

“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (10:15)

This passage is about entering the kingdom of God, eternal life, and everlasting salvation. In other words, it is a passage of eternal importance and infinite relevance. We need to know how to receive the kingdom of God like a child, or else we will not enter it at all. With that in mind, I want to draw out from the text four points about child-like faith, the kind of faith which receives and enters the kingdom of God.

The Lesson on Child-Like Faith

First, we see the lesson on child-like faith.

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them. (10:13-16)

In verse 13, Mark reports that “they” (αὐτοῖς – masculine pronoun, probably a reference to fathers¹) were bringing children to Jesus in order that He might bless them. This practice of bringing children to a rabbi for blessing was not an uncommon practice in ancient Israel.² At any rate, the disciples deemed that Jesus was much too busy to be bothered with such trivial matters as the blessing of children, and they “rebuked” (ἐπετίμησαν) them. When Jesus saw this, He was incensed (“indignant” = ἠγγανάκησεν; Edwards translates it “aroused to anger”³). This represented yet another gross misunderstanding of Jesus’ mission and kingdom on the part of the disciples, who seem to have been operating on the understanding that important people (like the rich man in the next passage) should get an audience with Jesus, but that children were a nuisance and a waste of His precious time. This misunderstanding on the part of the disciples lies at the root of several events in Mark 9 and 10: their argument over who among them was the greatest (9:33-36), their attempt to stop the unnamed exorcist who was not among their number (9:38-41), the request of James and John to sit in the seats of honor in the coming kingdom (10:35-45), and the rebuke of the blind beggar named Bartimaeus (10:46-52). At the root of all of these events lies the conviction that God operates upon the same value system as the world – the great, the wealthy, the powerful, and the influential are accorded more value and importance than the weak, the poor, the ordinary, and the inconsequential. This idea betrayed a dangerous confusion regarding the nature of Christ and His kingdom, and it could not be tolerated. And thus, Jesus addressed the error head on, teaching by His words and actions that the kingdom of God is not achieved by the wealthy and powerful; it is received by children.

First, they reveal the *necessity* of child-like faith. Jesus’ words in verses 14-15 are categorical, allowing for no exceptions. The reason the disciples should allow the children to come to Jesus, and not hinder them, is because the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. Then, in verse 15, Jesus restates the matter clearly and unequivocally. “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” Although it is not as clear in the English, in the Greek text Jesus’ statement is emphatic – “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a child shall **not** (οὐ μὴ – “not ever, in no wise”) enter into it.” There are no exceptions. Childlikeness is absolutely, utterly, completely necessary if we are to be saved.

I want you to notice two phrases, the first in verse 14 and the second in verse 15. In verse 14, Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to “such as these” (τῶν τοιούτων). In other words, it is not children *per se* to whom the kingdom of God belongs, but to those who are *like* children in some way. And in verse 15, Jesus says that only those who receive the kingdom *like a child* (ὡς παιδίον) will ever enter into it. So what we are looking for is a quality that children possess, a childlikeness that receives the kingdom of God and enters in. And unless we find it, and become it, we will not receive the kingdom nor enter it at all. But what is this childlikeness which Jesus requires? I find the answer in the word “receive” (δέξεται) in v. 15. The childlikeness which is required to enter the kingdom of God is a humble disposition of heart that *receives* the kingdom by faith, as a child receives a present from his father, rather than a heart that seeks to *achieve* the kingdom as a work of merit, as an employee receives a paycheck from his employer. That, I believe, is the *essence* of a child-like faith.

¹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 359. It is also possible that it could refer to older siblings bringing their younger siblings.

² Lane, 359.

³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 306.

How does a child receive a gift? I can think of two overarching qualities which describe this kind of reception. First, a child receives a gift *freely*, without thought of repayment. It is a uniquely adult quality which feels this inner compulsion to repay a gift. We have all experienced it. When you make out your list at Christmas of all the friends and family for whom you will buy gifts, inevitably there are some people who just don't make the cut. You cannot buy gifts for everyone, and choices have to be made, right? But what happens if someone who wasn't on your list buys *you* a gift? What is your immediate response? You have to go right out and buy them something in return. Why? Because as adults, we live under this compulsion to not owe anything to anyone. We have to keep our relational ledger clear so that no one can hold anything over us. We hate to be another's debt. But a gift does not impose a debt, or else it is not a gift. It is a loan. When someone gives us a gift, it comes with no demand of repayment. It is free. And children understand this. When they receive a gift, there is no thought of repayment. When I bring home a present to my kids, they don't go break their piggy banks and try to repay me. They don't immediately try to rustle up something to give me in return. They simply receive the gift and delight in it, and maybe run over give me a hug, which is all I want anyway. Secondly, a child receives a gift with *joy*. They delight in the gift, which brings joy and glory to the giver. When I give Benjamin a present, for instance a Lego set, my greatest joy is to see him rip into it and immerse himself in the joy of building. That delight, that joy, is what honors me most. Any other reaction, any thought of repayment, would diminish the gift and rob me of my joy and honor as his father and the giver of good gifts.

But what makes the difference between children and adults in this respect? Why do children know how to receive gifts, while adults do not? I think it centers upon the idea of *helplessness*. Children know they are helpless, they know they do not possess the resources to pay the mortgage, to keep the lights on, to put food on the table, to order and structure their days, or navigate through the complexities of life. They are content, therefore, to be served, to be provided for, to be cared for, to be loved. Adults, on the other hand, hate to feel helpless. They love to feel self-secure, self-sufficient, independent. And I think this accounts for the difference as to why children can receive gifts freely and with joy, while adults receive gifts as debt, thus negating the gift completely. Children know that there is such a qualitative difference between them and their parents, that when they receive a gift from their parents the thought of repayment doesn't even enter into their mind. How can a child repay his parents (cf. Rom. 11:35)? Furthermore, *why* should a child repay his parents? Adults, on the other hand, do not tend to view themselves as the inferior of anyone. Therefore, adults do not want to receive; they want to achieve. And as we will come to find out, this is why those who are like adults will never enter the kingdom of God. If you would enter into eternal life, you must come to God as a helpless little child, and receive His grace freely as a gift, with joy. This is what honors Him as the all-sufficient, all-powerful, all-gracious Father that He is. After all, who has ever given to the LORD that He might be repaid (Rom. 11:35)? What would you give Him that He needs?

Finally, in verse 16 we see the *result* of such childlike faith. "And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them." Only those who come to Jesus as a humble and helpless little child, receiving freely the gift of His kingdom, will know the smile of God, feel His strong, yet tender embrace, and experience His infinite blessing. But those who come to Jesus on the basis of their merit, looking to achieve, will be sent away with nothing.

The Antithesis of Child-Like Faith

And this is precisely what happened to the rich man in the next passage, and it is why Mark (and Matthew and Luke as well) records this encounter immediately following Jesus and the children. What does it look like to try to achieve the kingdom of God? It looks like this:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.' " And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (10:17-22)

This man is known by most as the "rich, young ruler," although in Mark's Gospel we are only told that he is "rich" – having "great possessions" (κτῆματα πολλά), a word which refers to real estate.⁴ Evidently, this man owned vast amounts of land. Matthew adds the detail that he was "young" (Matt. 19:22), and Luke adds that he was a "ruler" and was "extremely rich" (Luke 18:18, 23). Evidently, this man knew he was not right with God, for he was eaten up by a gnawing fear and uncertainty about his soul. In his torment he ran up to Jesus with an air of desperation, knelt before him (a gesture of great humility), and asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. So far, so good. Right?!

But something is dreadfully wrong. I find two troubling aspects to his question. I'll just mention the first, and then we will focus upon the second. First, it seems to me that this man does not possess a clear view of who Jesus is. His understanding of the identity of Jesus does not go deep enough. "Good Teacher," he calls Him. To this man, Jesus is a teacher, a rabbi worthy of great respect, and one who might just know the answer to this tormented man's deepest question. But there is an eternity of difference between regarding Jesus as a good teacher who *knows* the way to God, and the Messiah who is *Himself* the way to God. That this man does not yet see in Jesus "the way, the truth, and the life," through whom alone one may approach the Father (John 14:6), I think is evident in the way Jesus responds to him. "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." In other words, "Who do you say that I am?" (cf. 8:29) He then directs the man to the law and the commandments, just like any good rabbi would, since that seems to be what this man thinks of Him. You see, apart from a Mediator, apart from a Messiah, apart from a Savior, there is only the law. It is simple – "Do this, and you shall live." Lawkeepers do not need a Messiah; the righteous do not need a Savior. But then why is this man so troubled? It's understated, but I think Jesus is drawing out this man's conception of the Christ. A person coming to a rabbi asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" But a person coming to a Savior simply says, "Save me."

But second, the man's question itself is troubling. "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" That is the language of achievement. This man knows he doesn't possess eternal life. And so he inquires as to what requirement he has missed, what work he has left undone in order to achieve what he lacks. This man does not view himself as helpless; he views himself as

⁴ Edwards, 313.

merely ignorant. If only he can be told what work to do, what act to perform in order to complete the requirements and enter into the inheritance that God has promised to those who earn it, then he will do so, cash in his merit, and take what is coming to him. And lest we beat this man up as a rank legalist who is the exception rather than the rule, nearly everyone in first century Judaism thought like this, as do most in 21st century America. First century Judaism was confident that it was possible for a man to keep the law of God and thus merit eternal life. We have as a prime example the apostle Paul, who testifies in Philippians 3:6 that as to the righteousness that comes from the law, he was blameless.⁵ Even so, nearly everyone in our culture believes there is a God, nearly everyone believes there is some kind of judgment based upon some kind of moral standard, and nearly everyone believes that they have achieved that standard, whatever it may be. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” is not an exceptional question. It represents the worldview of all humanity by nature.

Thus, Jesus goes to work on him with the law of God. At first, Jesus gives him commandments which are, indeed, attainable – externally, at least. “Do not murder.” *I’ve never killed anyone.* “Do not commit adultery.” *I’ve never cheated on my wife.* “Do not steal.” *I’ve never taken anything that wasn’t mine.* “Do not bear false witness.” *I always tell the truth.* “Do not defraud.”⁶ *I’ve always paid everyone what they were owed.* “Honor your father and your mother.” *I’ve been a good son; I’ve obeyed my parents and taken care of them in their old age.* And so the man replied, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.”⁷ At this, Jesus strikes the devastating blow, taking the sword of the law and driving it deep into the man’s heart. For the law not only commands external adherence to a list of rules; it commands first and foremost that we have no other gods but the LORD (Ex. 20:2-3; Deut. 5:7). Or, to state it another way, it commands that we love the LORD our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength (Deut. 6:5). And this man loved money and everything it can buy – position, influence, power, comfort, security – more than he loved God. He had a god before the LORD – namely, himself. And so, when Jesus took the double-edged sword, eviscerated his self-confidence, and laid bare the thoughts and intentions of his heart (Heb. 4:12), He revealed the hideous, shriveled, black heart that lay below the man’s upright, moral exterior. “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” And with that, the man’s unbelief and idolatry were exposed, and he went away disheartened, sorrowful, and utterly lost.

This is the *antithesis* of the child-like faith that Jesus called for in the previous section. This man was not child-like. He did not regard himself as helpless. He did not need mercy; he had merit. He did not relate to God as a Father, as the Giver of free gifts to be received by faith. He related to God as an employer, who pays those who work for Him, who rewards those who measure up. The apostle Paul brought the difference between these two approaches to God into crystal clear relief in Romans 4, just as he did in the Romans 9 passage we saw earlier.

*Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.
And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly,
his faith is counted as righteousness. (Rom. 4:4-5)*

⁵ Lane, 366, note 45.

⁶ Μὴ ἀποστερήσης. The word has reference to not paying someone their due; withholding wages from a laborer who has earned them.

⁷ That is, twelve years of age, when Jewish boy assumed the yoke of the commandments and became responsible for their performance. Cf. Lane, 366.

There are only two ways to relate to God. You can relate to Him as an employee who works for wages, or you can relate to Him as a child who receives free gifts from his Father. The children of God will receive the kingdom. But the employees of God will receive wrath. Why? Because the only work which sinners are capable of producing is sin, and the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). And the rich man knew this, deep down. He had worked hard, but he knew intuitively that his wages were not eternal life, but death and wrath. His troubled conscience told him so. And Jesus, in His love (10:21), is trying to reveal this to him in order to get him to stop working, to stop relating to God as employee, and to receive the kingdom as a child.

What Jesus tells this man to do is utterly impossible for him, and that is the point. This man related to God on the basis of works and achievement, and so Jesus gave him a work to do that was utterly impossible for him to achieve – namely, to love God more than money, to love people more than himself. This man related to God on the basis of a law of righteousness, and so Jesus gave him a law that he absolutely could not keep – to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. And so it is for everyone who pursues the righteousness that is based upon works. It cannot be attained. The way of works and merit is forever shut to sinners, and the end thereof is death. The only way for sinners to inherit eternal life is the way of mercy and grace – not achieving the kingdom of God, but receiving the kingdom as a gift; not coming to Jesus as a rich, young ruler, but coming to Jesus as a helpless child.

The Necessity of Child-Like Faith

Now, I want you to listen to me very carefully, lest I be misunderstood. What Jesus said to this man was true. If he did not love God more than money, if he did not give up everything and follow Jesus (cf. Matt. 13:44; Mark 8:34-38), he would not have treasure in heaven and he would not inherit eternal life. That is true. But it was also impossible. A sinner *cannot* love God more than he loves himself. And so, what is to be done? Who can be saved? In verses 23-27, Jesus interprets for His disciples what has just taken place:

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”

Every sinner is an idolater by nature; every sinner loves something more than God.⁸ The disciples caught what Jesus was saying (amazing, right?!), and they were “exceedingly astonished” (περισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσοντο) at the implication.⁹ If what is required is denying yourself whatever it is you love most, taking up your cross, and following Jesus, then it is

⁸ In no way do I wish to remove the teeth from Jesus’ statement with regard to the wealthy. If impossibility allows degrees, it is *more* impossible for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God, for wealth poses an especially deadly hurdle to childlike faith.

⁹ Cf. Lane, 370 – “The disciples were more bewildered than before. They understood that the manner in which Jesus spoke of the rich in fact blocks the way for *any* man to achieve entrance into the Kingdom, and they were frightened by this implication.”

impossible for man to be saved. Trying to get sinful man into the kingdom of God is like trying to take a camel through the eye of a needle. Loving God more than yourself is the one thing sinful man *cannot* do (Rom. 8:8). But then comes the grace – “But what is impossible with man is possible with God.” You see, selling everything he owned was not itself the answer. He could have done that, in the strength of his own flesh, and still have fallen short of the kingdom, for he would not have done it out of love. What he needed was not a change in his bank account. What he needed was a change of heart.

And now we see the necessity of child-like faith. What should this man have said in response to Jesus? *You’re right, Jesus. I get what you are saying. I don’t love God more than money, and I don’t love people more than myself. I haven’t kept the law at all. I’m such a sinner. Please help me. Forgive me of my sins. Change my heart, so that I can love God truly and love people deeply. I cannot save myself. I need you.* And what would Jesus’ response have been? “Your sins are forgiven; rise, and walk in the love and joy and peace of a new heart.” That is how this man could have received the kingdom, by coming to Jesus as a helpless child, and trusting Him to do what he could never do for himself.

The Inheritance of Child-Like Faith

Watching this entire episode transpire was Peter. And he recognized that what Jesus had required of the rich man, what he said was impossible for any but God, had indeed transpired within his own heart, at least in seed form. Now, don’t get me wrong, Peter did not yet love Jesus with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, or else he would not have denied Christ three times. But he *did* love Him – truly and deeply. In other words, Peter had been born again, and his love for Christ would continue to deepen and grow throughout his life. Therefore, it is true that what Jesus had called the rich man to do, Peter and the other disciples had done. Therefore,

Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (10:27-30)

Jesus assures Peter that what He promises is true. There is an inheritance for the children of God. God is a good Father who gives good gifts to His children, and whatever they may give up He gives back a hundredfold – both now in this time (through the fellowship and joy of the church), and in the age to come. And, as we have seen so many times before, so we see now again. Persecution is also a part of the inheritance in this life. I think Mark is sure to add this detail (cf. its absence in Matt. 19:29 and Luke 18:30) lest the persecuted church to whom he writes think that their sufferings means that they aren’t the children of God.

Counting Our Righteousness as Loss for the Sake of Christ

Jesus then summarizes this whole section in verse 31:

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (10:31)

So it was with the Gentiles and the Jews in Romans 9; so it is with the children and the rich man in Mark 10. And so it remains today. There are only two ways to approach God. You can come as an independent, self-assured, self-righteous adult, an employee who gives to God his work and receives from God his wages. *No grace, thank you very much, I'll do it on my own.* But your wages will be death and wrath, for you cannot work what the law demands. You cannot love God with all your heart, and you cannot love people as yourself.

*“‘Run, Tim, Run!’ the law commands,
but gives me neither feet nor hands;
Better news the gospel brings,
it bids me fly, then gives me wings.”*

The gospel bids you to come to God as a little child, humble and helpless, and let God work for you. By faith, receive His kingdom. By faith, inherit eternal life. By faith, receive the forgiveness of your sins, a new heart that is capable of loving God and loving people, and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit to help you walk in that love. Become last, and God will make you first.