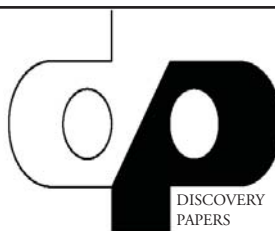


BECOMING A CHILD

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



Catalog No. 090823
Mark 10:13-31
30th Message
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August 23, 2009

As children, we crave adulthood. When we grow up, we realize adulthood is not all it's cracked up to be. Sometimes, when my children cry because they think I've deprived them of something, I think, "You have no idea how good you have it." I don't tell them that (usually!); I just think it.

As we grow up, we learn that not everyone can be trusted. We learn to cling tightly to what we value, lest it be ripped from our grasp. We learn to be suspicious and possessive. It takes vigilance to be suspicious and possessive, however. It can drain you of vitality and hope. Maybe, if you've entered adulthood, you're weary of being suspicious and possessive. You want to recapture vitality and hope, or capture it in a new way. You might therefore daydream once in a while about what it might be like to be a child again—or maybe what it might be like to become a child again in a new way. Maybe, in some sense, that's what we need: we need to become children. At least that's what Jesus, in Mark 10:13-31, says we need.

After reporting a question-and-answer session about marriage and divorce, Mark turns, quite naturally, to teaching that involves children, who come from marriage and are affected by divorce.

Mark 10:13-31:

¹³And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all. ¹⁶And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them.

¹⁷As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹You 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.'"

²⁰And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." ²¹Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

²²But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property.

²³And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."

²⁸Peter began to say to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You." ²⁹Jesus 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 farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, ³⁰but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last, first."¹

Trusting like a child

Earlier, when the disciples were debating which one of them was the greatest, Jesus took a child into his arms to redirect them. John, one of the disciples, supposed that if the debate concerning which of the disciples was the greatest was a non-starter, then surely, at the least, each of the disciples enjoyed special status as the intimates of Jesus. Not so, said Jesus. He rebuked the disciples for trying to prevent someone from casting out demons who didn't belong to the inner circle. Jesus told the disciples not to "hinder" the man, who was "for us" (Mark 9:33-41). Now, Jesus becomes incensed that his disciples are trying to "hinder" those who are bringing children to him. Jesus and his disciples are making their way to Jerusalem, and the disciples deem both Jesus and their pilgrimage too important to be interrupted by children. Jesus, on the other hand, regularly allowed children to come to him and gave them his complete attention (Mark 5:23; 7:29-30; 9:17, 36-37, 42).

If you're not around children regularly, find a way to get them in your life, perhaps through friends, relatives, or a ministry to children. They have a way of cutting through adult pretension to show us the beauty of the kingdom of God. How we treat children matters so much to Jesus that mistreatment of children engenders his anger for one of the few times in the gospels.

Jesus once again uses children as an illustration. Earlier, he said whoever receives a child in his name receives

both him and the Father (9:36-37). Now, he goes further, declaring that children and others of lowly status have a home in the kingdom of God and even that entrance into the kingdom is predicated on receiving it as a child. If the disciples are still concerned for their status, they have to become as those with no status in order to enter the kingdom of God. To receive the kingdom as a child means that the disciples, who have recognized Jesus as the Christ, the ruler of the kingdom, must trust him, as a child trusts his or her parents, and embrace his topsy-turvy values.

Earlier, he took a child into his arms; now he takes multiple children into his arms, blesses them, and lays his hands on them. Indeed, the kingdom of God belongs to such as these—to such as the disciples, if they learn to embrace not only Jesus but also his definition of the kingdom of God, which repudiates human notions of status.

The children allowed Jesus to take them in his arms. They had no reason to believe that he would drop them. When I throw my girls in the air, they grin ear to ear; sometimes they even laugh hysterically. The possibility that I might not catch them never enters their mind. They trust me. To enter the kingdom of God, we must trust Jesus like a child.

Jesus, after blessing the children, resumes his journey to Jerusalem. As he does so, he encounters an adult who needs to become like a child.

Receiving like a child

In contrast to the children, who were brought to Jesus, a man runs up to Jesus of his own accord, urgent to speak with him about “eternal life”—literally, “life of age,” or life in the new age. Jesus has just finished speaking about the kingdom of God. In Jewish thought, the new age begins when the kingdom of God comes, when God establishes his rule on earth. When the kingdom of God comes and the new age begins, God would vindicate his people, who would then enjoy life in the new age. The question is, Who are those people? The standard answer among law-keeping Jews is, “We are, and you know who we are because we observe the law that God gave us through Moses.” The man who runs up to Jesus, however, is not completely satisfied with the standard answer. The man addresses Jesus as “good” teacher, but Jesus pushes back, as if to say, “Wait until you hear what I have to say before you call me good.” Those in our world who call Jesus a good teacher might want to more carefully consider what he says and then reevaluate their assessment, for the good teacher demands loyalty and holds forth the prospect of hell for those who reject him.

Jesus recites for the man some of the Ten Commandments, starting with the sixth command; substituting “do not defraud” for “do not covet,” the tenth command; and circling back to the fifth command, which concerns honoring parents. The first four commands, conspicuous by their absence, concern relationship with God.² The insertion concerning defrauding lessens, at least for the moment, the command concerning coveting, for matters of behavior are more easily regulated than matters of the heart: it is easier to not do something than to not want something.

The way in which Jesus recites the Ten Commandments,

reworking the order and lessening the prohibition against coveting, opens the door for the man’s answer: “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.” The man isn’t claiming perfect obedience. Observant Jews didn’t believe that perfect obedience was necessary for life in the new age; their covenant with God, with its sacrificial system, made provision for disobedience. No, they believed that those who “kept” the law, or who respected the law, marked themselves out as those who would inherit life in the new age, even if their obedience to the law was imperfect. Thus, the man is simply claiming to be an observant Jew.

Jesus, motivated by love, tells him literally that he is lacking “one,” not one “thing.” What does the man lack? He lacks God, who is One, who was, not coincidentally, missing from Jesus’ recitation of the commands (Deuteronomy 6:4). The man is keeping the commands, at least some of them, but he’s missing the God of the commands.

What must he do? In short, he must do what everyone must do: he must repent and believe. When Jesus began preaching, he said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The man must forsake other gods and embrace the God of Israel, who is bringing his kingdom near in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Jewish king. For this man, repentance means selling his possessions and giving to the poor, which involves a repudiation of covetousness and therefore adherence to the tenth command. He must become like a child, having nothing, in order to receive everything: treasure in heaven, in the kingdom of God. For this man, believing means following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Relationship with God, featured in the first four commands, is fulfilled by relationship with Jesus. Loyalty to God is expressed in loyalty to Jesus, with replaces loyalty to the law. If the man repents and believes, when the new age reaches maturity and the kingdom of God is established, when heaven comes to earth, then the treasure that has been stored up for him in heaven will be fully his.

Jesus felt love when he spoke to the man, but the man feels sadness when he hears Jesus. Earlier, the man ran up to Jesus and knelt before him; now, he departs in grief. Why the sadness? Why the grief? Why run up only to walk away? Mark’s comment is, as they say, the rest of the story, which makes sense of the whole story: “he was a man who owned much property.” The man couldn’t part with his land. Now we see that he represents many law-keeping Jews of the day. Land meant everything to them. The Romans ruled their land, and they wanted it back, no matter how much blood they had to spill. For them, when the kingdom of God came, God would fight on their side to overthrow their oppressors. Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God is not like that. Earlier, he told his disciples, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world [not just the Promised Land] and forfeit his soul [literally, his “life”: life in the new age]?” A little strip of land is nothing. The new creation, which Jesus is bringing about, is everything. From a biblical perspective, the Promised Land is just a shadow of the new earth (Matthew 5:5; Romans 4:13; Hebrews 12:8-10, 13-16). The man, like most of Israel, cannot embrace Jesus and his vision of the kingdom of God. After hearing the words of Jesus, would the man still call him “good teacher”? We’re left to wonder.

First, Jesus taught us to become like children and trust him. Now, in his dealings with the landowner, Jesus teaches us to become like children who have nothing. You become like a child who has nothing in order to receive everything. To become a child who has nothing, you first have to part with what means everything to you. You can't receive a gift with your hands full. Many people can't receive the kingdom of God because they can't let go of what they value. They can't let go of their investments; they can't let go of their vision of how life is supposed to be; they can't let go of their belief that everything will be fine as long as they keep a few rules. God wants to give us, quite literally, everything: the new creation. He wants to give us everything, and we keep holding onto something.

A character in C.S. Lewis' novel *The Great Divorce* describes those who choose hell this way:

*For a damned soul is nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself. Good beats upon the damned incessantly as sound waves beat on the ears of the deaf, but they cannot receive it. Their fists are clenched, their teeth are clenched, their eyes fast shut. First they will not, and in the end they cannot, open their hands for gifts, or their mouths for food, or their eyes to see.*³

To enter the kingdom of God, we must unclench our fists and receive it like a child.

Jesus' actions, welcoming children and sending a wealthy man packing, must have puzzled the disciples. How do children help the cause? What more promising recruit for the kingdom of God than a wealthy landowner who could finance the mission? Jesus, after having looking at the landowner with love, looks around and turns his attention to his disciples.

What's impossible

The disciples had enough evidence from their scriptures to believe that wealth was a sign of God's favor (Job 1:10, 42:10; Psalm 128:1-2; Isaiah 3:10). They are therefore amazed when Jesus tells them that the entrance of the wealthy into the kingdom of God is especially problematic. Jesus goes so far as to use an illustration—of a camel going through the eye of a needle—that conveys the impossibility of the wealthy entering the kingdom of God. Wealth is a gift from God, but it's not a sign—and never was a sign—of membership in God's people. He gives and he takes away for reasons of his own, just as he blesses both the evil and the good (Job 1:21, Matthew 5:45).

Why is it so difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God? The landowner just illustrated Jesus' point. The first command says, "You shall have no other gods before Me," but wealth is a powerful false god that promises to meet the needs of its worshipers better than the true God. To forsake such a powerful god—to be willing to part with every cent—and to believe that Jesus, with his upside-down vision of the kingdom, is in fact the ruler of the kingdom was too much for the landowner, as it is for most wealthy people.

Jesus, though, is not only rendering comment on the plight of the rich; he observes, in verse 24, how difficult it is for anyone to enter the kingdom of God. In fact, when his astonished disciples ask who can be saved, which is another way of asking who can enter the kingdom of God,

he answers that it is impossible not just for the wealthy to be saved but for anyone to be saved: "With people, it is impossible."

What's possible

Jesus asks the impossible of us. Sure, it's possible for rich people to sell everything and give it to the poor. It's been done before—not very often, but it's been done. But it's impossible for someone who sells everything and gives it to the poor to enter the kingdom of God. It's impossible for anyone, no matter how devoted he is to God, to be saved. A camel cannot go through the eye of a needle; an adult cannot become a child; no one can enter the kingdom of God. It is simply not humanly possible.

Baby, the protagonist in Heather O'Neill's novel *Lullabies for Little Children*, endures a horrific childhood. Nevertheless, she laments, "I don't know why I was upset about not being an adult. It was right around the corner. Becoming a child again is what is impossible. That's what you have a legitimate reason to be upset over. Childhood is the most valuable thing that's taken away from you in life, if you think about it."⁴

Many of us cling tenaciously to the belief that if we just try a little harder, do a little better, and fix a few problems, everything will be all right. Many of us have tried just about everything, and everything still isn't all right. There is nothing we can do to make everything all right. Jesus tells us that what we're trying to do is impossible so that we'll stop trying to do it.

What, then, is possible? It's possible to give up. It's possible to stop trying so hard to make everything all right. It's possible to stop trying to save ourselves. Then, what's impossible becomes possible, for Jesus tells his disciples, and us, "With people, it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." Jesus told another man who ran up to him, "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23). Only God can convert adults into children so that they might be saved and enter the kingdom of God. We have to confess human impossibility to accept divine possibility. When you give up, you open up: you open up to grace. Then God makes it possible for you to trust like a child and receive like a child. He makes it possible for you to receive the kingdom of God and enter the kingdom of God. He makes it possible, by his Holy Spirit, for you to embrace the values of the kingdom of God. He makes it possible for you, if Jesus calls you this way, to sell all you have and give it to the poor, not because doing so gets you into the kingdom, but because that's what it means for you to follow Jesus.

How does God do what's impossible for us? He orchestrates events, he precipitates crises, and he gives us impressions. In one way or another, he shows us the bankruptcy of our adult suspiciousness and possessiveness and the beauty of childlike trust and receptivity on the other hand. Sometimes, he uses a child, or someone else of lowly status, as in the case of Augustine. Torn by conflicting emotions, attracted by sin but wanting forgiveness for it, Augustine erupted in tears one day. Leaving a companion and a copy of the scriptures, he sought solitude in a garden and fell down under a fig tree. He tells the story in *Confessions*:

I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter

contrition of my heart, when, lo, I heard the voice as of a boy or girl, I know not which, coming from a neighboring house, chanting, and oft repeating, "Take up and read; take up and read." ... So, restraining the torrent of my tears, I rose up, interpreting it no other way than as a command to me from heaven to open the book, and to read the first chapter I should light upon. ... So quickly I returned to the place where I had put down the volume of the apostles. I grasped, opened, and in silence read that paragraph on which my eyes first fell, "Not in revelry and drunkenness, not in licentiousness and lewdness, not in strife and envy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts." No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended, by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart, all the gloom of doubt vanished away.⁵

To enter the kingdom of God, we must trust Jesus for his vision of the kingdom, as a child trusts a parent, even as he turns our world upside down an inside out and repudiates our notions of what matters and what doesn't. Let Jesus touch you. Let him take you in his arms. Let him bless you. He's not going to drop you.

Can you really trust your investments? Has your vision of how life is supposed to be let you down? Like the wealthy landowner, have you kept the rules but missed God? In missing God, have you missed Jesus? Do you think it might be possible to gain everything you want and still lose your life? Jesus is looking at you, feeling love. Let go of your adult notions and become a child. Receive the kingdom of God. Receive Jesus. Receive the new creation.

Jesus affirms the disciples

If the landowner couldn't accept Jesus' terms, but it's also well nigh impossible for anyone—and especially the wealthy—to enter the kingdom of God, then Peter, one of his disciples, wants to know, "What about us?" When Jesus summoned the first disciples, they left their livelihoods and their families in order to follow him (Mark 1:14-20, 2:14). He did not tell them, as he told the landowner, to sell everything, and the gospels suggest that at least some of them retained at least some possessions (Mark 1:29, 2:15; John 21:3). However, Jesus told them, and anyone interested in following him, to deny themselves and take up their crosses—to lose their lives for his sake and the sake of the gospel in order to save them (Mark 8:34-35).

The disciples may have parted with virtually everything, at least temporarily, in order to follow Jesus, but they still haven't parted with their vision of the kingdom of God, which has them jockeying for position. They have yet to embrace Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God, which involves taking up one's cross: voluntarily absorbing the wrath of enemies in order to bless the world. For that, they must keep following Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and beyond. But, Jesus says, they're on the right track—as are all those who at this time are following him, even if they're unclear about what following him means. The disciples are, after all, following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. You only learn to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus by following him—and trusting him to teach you the rest on the way.

The kingdom of God belongs to those who become like

children, trust Jesus, and receive it as a gift. Yes, it looks as if it belongs to the disciples, too, even if they have a long way to go and much to learn. Jesus, after all, addresses them as "children." Although they don't yet understand that the gospel calls for both Jesus and his followers to suffer, they are among those who have given up much for the sake of both Jesus and the gospel, the good news concerning the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. But what they have received and will receive more than makes up for what they have lost and will lose. If following Jesus costs them houses and families and farms, then they'll receive more of the same in abundance, even in this age: a multitudinous family of Jesus' followers who will welcome them into their houses and share the fruit of their farms. Ah, but they'll also receive something they never gave up and never asked for: persecutions. They will learn, though, to receive persecution as a gift and find refuge from their persecutors in the arms of their new family, just like David, when he was persecuted by Saul.⁶

In the new age, they'll receive life in the new age. Although Jesus doesn't specify the nature of this life, we're left to assume that those who follow Jesus will receive in the new age more of what they have received in this age, absent the persecutions. The present age and the age to come are somewhat similar. This is because the age to come, along with the kingdom of God, has broken into this world in the person of Jesus, though it still awaits consummation. Those who follow Jesus experience the life of the new age in this age, especially in the new family of Jesus.

For Jews, loyalty to family—like loyalty to the Mosaic Law—was sacrosanct. In Mark 10:28-31, loyalty to Jesus replaces loyalty to family, just as it replaced loyalty to the law in Mark 10:17-22.

Jesus affirms Peter and the other disciples who have left everything to follow him but also warns them: a good start, or even a head start, does not guarantee a good finish. The twelve disciples were among the first to follow Jesus, but "many who are first will be last." Once they saw Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God more clearly, all of his first followers abandoned him, at least temporarily, and one of them finished poorly (Mark 14:18, 43, 50). On the other hand, many who are currently not following Jesus and others whom the disciples are dismissing, such as children and others of lowly status, will follow Jesus, finish well, and enter the kingdom of God when the new age takes over the present age.

On the right track

It's encouraging for those of us who haven't given everything to the poor to know that it's possible to still be on the right track. You learn to follow Jesus by following Jesus and trusting him to teach you. If we are following Jesus, even if we're unclear about what following Jesus means, even if we have a long way to go and much to learn, Jesus addresses us as children. God is making us fully what we cannot become on our own: children who trust, children who receive. Maybe, then, old age, when our bodies and minds fail us, is a gift that helps us trust and receive. For in old age, we become weak and dependent—like a child. In various ways and at different times, Jesus will challenge you to part with your vision of how life should work.

The gospels report that Jesus, on one occasion, told a

man to sell everything and give it to the poor. He could possibly tell you to do that. He could possibly tell you to do something even more difficult. You don't know. You do know that he's telling you to take up your cross—to practice self-giving love—and follow him. If you do that, however fearfully and clumsily and waywardly, you're on the right track. What do you get if you do that? Everything—including a multitudinous family of Jesus' followers who will welcome you into their homes and share with you the fruit of their labors, in this age, yes, but even more abundantly in the age to come. By the way, the importance of hospitality in the kingdom of God cannot be overemphasized.

Be forewarned, though: a good start doesn't guarantee a good finish. What threatens a good finish is the very thing that will make or break you as a follower of Jesus: the crises in your life, both major and minor, that challenge your vision of how life should work. Many who are first, who seem the most enthusiastic about following Jesus, will be last: they will become more entrenched in their adulthood because of such crises. God, on the other hand, would use such crises to convert us from suspicious and possessive adults to children who trust and receive.

Run up to Jesus

Perhaps you identify with the landowner. You're suspicious and possessive. You're doing the right things and you have much, but you don't have vitality and hope. Your questions provoke you to run up to Jesus and kneel before him. You ask him what you must do. He tells you to let go what you have. He tells you to let go of doing the right things to make everything all right. The landowner went away grieving. How about you? Maybe God, though a network of events, crises, and impressions, is enabling you to let go. Maybe he is converting you to a child. "I will arise and go to Jesus / He will embrace me in his arms / And in the arms of my dear Savior / O there are ten thousand charms."⁷ Don't walk away grieving. Trust Jesus. Receive the kingdom. Follow Jesus in the way of the Lord, rejoicing.

What do you need to release to receive something better? What do you need to release to receive the kingdom of God.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

A Kingdom of God: Receive it as a child (13-16)

1 They brought children so that Jesus might touch them (13-14a)

2 Kingdom of God belongs to such as these (14b)

2' Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child ... (15)

1' Jesus took them in his arms and laid his hands on them (16)

B Follow Jesus to inherit eternal life (17-22)

1 A man ran up to Jesus (17)

2 Jesus: You know the commandments (18-19)

X Man: Teacher, I have kept all these things (20)

2' Jesus: One thing you lack (21)

1' Man saddened, went away (22)

A' Difficulty of entering kingdom of God (23-27)

1 Jesus: How hard for the wealthy to enter kingdom of God (23)

2 Disciples amazed at his words (24a)

X Jesus: Illustration about difficulty for a rich man (24b-25)

2' Disciples even more astonished (26)

1' Jesus: All things are possible with God (27)

B' Leave everything for sake of Jesus to receive eternal life (28-31)

1 Peter: We have left everything to follow you (28)

X Jesus: Reward for leaving everything for sake of Jesus and gospel (29-30)

1' Jesus: Many who are first will be last, and the last, first (31)

² That Jesus begins with the sixth command and then circles back, but not all the way back to the first command, makes the absence of the first four commands all the more conspicuous.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946), 123.

⁴ Heather O'Neill, *Lullabies for Little Children* (HarperCollins e-books, 2008).

⁵ <http://www.bible-researcher.com/tolle-lege.html>

⁶ Note that Jesus doesn't speak of leaving spouses. Recently, he equated divorce with adultery (Mark 10:11-12). Also, the word translated "children" (*paidia*) is the word for adult children, so he's not speaking of leaving young children. At any rate, he's not speaking of disowning one's family but of joining him for a period of itinerant ministry, culminating in Jerusalem. Recently, he recited the command to "honor your father and mother" (Mark 10:19). Honoring parents and leaving them to follow him therefore are not incompatible. Furthermore, Jesus talks of leaving a father but not of receiving a father, though leaving brothers and sisters and mothers and children results in receiving those family members. Why doesn't Jesus say those who leave fathers will receive fathers? Perhaps because those who leave fathers receive a heavenly Father.

⁷ "Come, Ye Sinners," Joseph Hart, *Hymns Composed on Various Subjects*, 1759, alt.; refrain anonymous.