

## Follow: Receiving the Kingdom

### Mark 10:13-16

The Appalachian Trail is a hiking trail that stretches from northern Georgia to Maine and extends for around 2200 miles. Every year thousands of people begin hiking on the trail at this spot, during the spring and hike the entire thing, finishing in Maine in the fall.

Obviously, it takes a certain mentality to gather the materials and begin an endeavor like this. First of all, that's a lot of walking. Second, you will have to carry your gear with you and sleep along the trail. Of course, there are towns along the way where you can leave the trail and buy more food, but you still have to carry your tent, your sleeping bag, water, food, bug spray, etc. Third, it's not like the trail is free from any hazards at all. Here are the potential difficulties associated with hiking the Appalachian Trail: severe weather, American black bear, tick-borne diseases, mosquitos, yellowjackets, biting flies, chiggers, steep grades, limited water, dangerous fordings, diarrhea from water, poison ivy, venomous snakes.

Like I said, it takes certain qualities to begin something like this: you have to be tough, adventurous, and a little insane. I think those some qualities that lead a person to begin something like this are necessary for the completion of it as well. You have to continue as you began.

We've been talking about a different type of journey over the last several Sundays. In Mark 8:27 – 10:52 we are learning about the journey of following Jesus as one of His disciples. We've talked a lot about what life looks like while following Christ, but we haven't talked as much about what it looks like to begin this journey of discipleship. That's what we want to learn this week and next.

So, open to Mark 10:13-16 this morning. We're going to do something a bit different this morning in the way we study this passage. It's a short passage and there's one question that pops out when you begin studying this little story. I want to give you that question, then walk you through the text to show you how we got to that question and why that question matters, and then I want to answer that question using the book of Mark.

So, here's the question: What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God as a child? You can see from that question we are talking about the beginning of life as a disciple. Jesus tells us that to receive the kingdom we have to do it as a child and we want to find out what that means. We want to know HOW we are to begin this journey. How are we to initially respond to the offer of the kingdom?

Last week we studied this interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees and ultimately the disciples regarding marriage and divorce in Mark 10:1-12. This little story doesn't necessarily happen right after that story, but Mark has placed it here in his gospel because of the implications on our lives as disciples. Look at verse 13.

The implication here is that parents were bringing their children so Jesus could bless them by touching them. We've seen Jesus use personal touch in significant ways in Mark, particularly when healing. Here He is not healing, but conveying a blessing from a Rabbi through laying on of hands would have been pretty normal during this time. But notice what happens when the parents get close with their small children.

The disciples step in, almost like security guards, and rebuke the parents for bringing their kids to Jesus. Why did they do this? Did they want people to come through them to get to Jesus? Did they see children as a nuisance that would keep Jesus from more important work? Whatever the reason, this passage ought to remind you of a passage we just studied a couple of weeks ago. Look back to Mark 9:36-37. Of course, Jesus says this because children are among the most marginalized and weakest members of society.

The disciples heard Jesus say this, now they have the opportunity to act on what they heard and show they are understanding and responding to Jesus's instruction, and they completely blow it. Jesus responds with anger and frustration toward the disciples. Look at the first part of verse 14. He was vexed by their actions. So he teaches them. Look at the rest of v. 14.

He tells them not to hinder children from coming. This is the same word used in 9:38 regarding the man casting out demons. The disciples clearly haven't gotten the message. But notice in v. 14 Jesus gives them a reason WHY they must let the children come to him.

Now, we need a little refresher on the kingdom of God. Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom and announcing its arrival. The kingdom of God is the message that God has shown back up and invaded human history through the person and mission of Jesus Christ. His rule is advancing and beginning to set things right. Through Jesus God will triumph over evil. Jesus points out in verse 14 that this kingdom belongs to people like these children. They participate in this kingdom.

Ok, but why does the kingdom belong to people who are like children? That's a great question and verse 15 is the answer to that question. Look there.

You can tell this is a significant word from Jesus because he begins by saying "Truly". We want to sit up and take notice of his explanation for why the kingdom belongs to those who are child-like. He states his saying negatively here, but the point is clear. To enter the kingdom, which is another way of saying what verse 14 said, that the kingdom belongs to you...to enter the kingdom you must receive the kingdom as a child.

Or, to say it negatively as Jesus does, if you do not receive the proclamation of God's kingdom through Jesus, His Son, as a child or like a child, you will not ultimately enter His kingdom on the last day. This is not a casual word. This is weighty. We are talking about eternal destinies here and the manner in which we respond to the arrival of God's rule and reign through Jesus.

Jesus is using a metaphor here to teach. He isn't saying that you have to first receive the kingdom before you can vote or buy cigarettes. He's saying there are qualities in the way a child receives something that must characterize the way you receive the kingdom. I know some of you are probably sitting there going, why can't Jesus just be more specific. Why does he have to use a vague metaphor? Why doesn't he just spell it out? Metaphors force us to think and then the moment of recognition when the connection is crystallized is a powerful moment.

So, let's think through the question I posed earlier and learn as we go. What does it mean to receive the kingdom as a child? 3 Answers.

### **1. Receive in Need**

Here is the understatement of the millennium: Small children are needy, particularly those 5 and under. Our family was laughing the other day about how many questions Bethany gets asked during the day because of the constant

neediness of small people. You know what question dad gets asked right? Where's mom? Think about how helpless our son Grey is at this point and he's already lived almost 2 full years! He can't even make a pizza by himself!

You see this neediness in the very story we are looking at. Look back at verse 13. These children were brought to Jesus. They were dependent on others in nearly every sense of the word. We learned this about children in 9:36-37. Jesus uses them as an illustration of the least of these. You don't serve a child in order to get something in return.

When you and I come face to face with the claims of Christ and the offer of entering the kingdom through Him, we must respond to that with a profound sense of our own neediness. One author said that those who come to Christ bring "No stellar religious resume." We do not respond to God's rule and reign by touting our own morality and accomplishments. Unfortunately, this is exactly what the disciples were still doing. Remember in 9:34 where they were debating who among them was the greatest? That is the exact opposite of receiving the kingdom as a child.

When I served as a college pastor I had lots of students who would struggle with assurance of salvation. They would often look back on the time when they prayed to receive Christ and wonder if they had enough faith. One guy in particular just kept asking me about the nature of true faith and how he could know if he believed correctly. I eventually told him, look, I think true faith recognizes need and its own inability so it says something like this. "Jesus, I am banking on the promises you give in your word regarding your finished work and forgiveness of sin and if you don't save me I will end up in hell. I can't do anything to stop it and I am free falling 100% on you and if I end up in hell, it is what it is.

Coming to grips with our neediness puts us in a place to receive God's authority and reign. Neediness is closely connected to our second answer to what it means to receive the kingdom as a child.

## **2. Receive in Humility**

People often think of humility as a low opinion of self, but that's not it. Children often have a simple humility about them where they recognize who they are and

don't put on pretenses. Humility means properly assessing yourself and knowing your place. What does this mean for receiving the kingdom?

At the very beginning of Mark the preaching ministry of Jesus is summarized like this: Mark 1:14-15. Notice the response that is called for. This is how people are to receive the news of the kingdom. They are to rightly assess their own situation by acknowledging their sin, turning from it, and turning to Christ in faith.

Here is the starting point. God is holy. He is unique and free from stain. We are sinful. We must humbly reckon with this reality to receive the kingdom. Sinful and stained people cannot enter the kingdom of a holy God. The only way to come into His kingdom and presence with joy is to be cleansed from our sin and this means knowing we are sinners and humbly crying out for Christ's blood to cleanse us from our sin. And this leads to our 3<sup>rd</sup> answer to this question of what it means to receive the kingdom as a child.

### **3. Receive as a Gift**

One of the great joys of parenting is occasionally being able to give your kids good gifts and to watch their unbridled joy. Children love gifts and receive them with excitement.

There's a difference in receiving an item you paid for and receiving a gift. Your child may say thank you when the cashier hands him or her the new baseball glove that was just purchased with allowance money. But there's a different reaction to receiving that new glove as a gift, having done nothing to earn it.

We must keep that difference in mind because I think appropriately receiving the kingdom means recognizing this good news and all it entails as a gift. Listen to Jesus's words to the disciples in Mark 4:11. Knowledge of the kingdom is a gift from God, but it doesn't always seem that way does it? We would all verbally affirm that salvation, receiving the kingdom, is a gift, but we don't often feel the way that kid does when a brand new baseball glove just showed up one morning.

Why? A gift is an act of grace, given with no obligation required in return. But I fear that deep down we don't think of the kingdom as a gift because we think we are somehow deserving. Or we have done something to qualify us to receive.

Rather than trying to think of salvation as a gift, let's start with something lesser and build toward the reception of the kingdom as a gift.

I know life on this earth is difficult at times. We have sickness, pain, relational difficulties and more. But stop for a moment and think about the sheer goodness of the gifts we receive from God daily. The smell of coffee in the morning. The sunrise. The joy of little feet running down the hallway. The beauty of a song. The delicate petal of a rose. What did you do to earn any of those? Nothing. What did you do to earn that last breathe you just took or the fact that your heart beat the last 60 seconds? What have we done to merit good poetry, friends, family, taking a nap, and cinnamon rolls?

Matthew 5:44-45 describes a gracious God who gives out these temporal blessings to all mankind. God is so gloriously good that he gives beautiful sunrises to those who deny his existence! If all of this is a gift from God to those who are undeserving, how much more is the good news of the kingdom a gift? The good news of the gospel is that God is going to deliver us from sin and remake this world that we enjoy so much now, except it will be finally and fully free from corruption. He doesn't do that as some sort of repayment for all the wonderful things you have done for Him. He does that because of who He is. He is love and He wants His children to rejoice in the gift of His kingdom so that we will delight in the giver of the kingdom.

So, how must we receive the kingdom? As children who are needy, humble, and who have been blessed by an undeserved gift. One author summed it up nicely:

*"To receive the kingdom of God as a child is to receive it as one who has no credits, no clout, no claims. A little child has absolutely nothing to bring, and whatever a child receives, he or she receives by grace on the basis of sheer neediness rather than by any merit inherent in him- or herself. Little children are paradigmatic disciples, for only empty hands can be filled."* – James Edwards

When we receive the kingdom in this manner, we will continue to follow Christ in this manner as well. With a sense of neediness, a recognition of our sin, and overwhelming gratitude for the gift of God's grace.