Mark Lesson 33 (2023)

**LITTLE CHILDREN AND GOD’S KINGDOM**

(Subtitle: Unless You Change)

Mark 10:13-16

Key Verse: 10:15

“Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

In last week’s passage, 10:1-12, Jesus strongly voiced the sanctity of marriage in response to the Pharisee’s question concerning divorce. Highlighting God’s purpose in the first marriage in the garden of Eden, Jesus reaffirmed that happy marriage is not an accidental fortune but the fruit of a lifelong commitment and healthy partnership between husband and wife, which requires a lot of wisdom and discipline. (Pic#1)

The story in today’s passage is short, with only four verses. Yet it’s straightforward. It contains an indispensable spiritual lesson concerning God’s kingdom and eternal life in our daily lives. Jesus already talked about little children in 9:36-37, in which he emphasized the importance of a humble attitude as his disciples. However, the main point of today’s passage is different. It talks about the blessedness of a childlike attitude. Let’s think about what kind of childlike attitude we should have if we want to experience God’s kingdom now and for the rest of our lives.

Look at verse 13. “People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.” It was customary for people to bring their children to a rabbi for a blessing. The people who brought their children to Jesus highly respected him as one who was in close contact with God. They wanted their children to be blessed by God through Jesus’ special prayer. But Jesus’ disciples rebuked them, probably screaming, *“Who told you to bring little kids? They are too noisy and are not welcome here. Only adults, please!”* We understand why the disciples discouraged those bringing the children to him. The presence of little children can be distracting, especially when they cry aloud for unknown reasons. After all, Jewish society in the first century was patriarchal; men were considered vital community members, while children were to be seen but now heard, and their needs were secondary. In the eyes of Jesus’ disciples, the children were less important. They might have thought they shouldn’t allow Jesus to be hindered by the distraction of little kids so that he could spend his time and energy doing more important things.

How did Jesus respond to the disciples? He didn’t appreciate the way they treated little children. Look at verse 14. “When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.’” It’s easy to overlook that Mark, unlike Matthew and Luke, stated that Jesus became **indignant** when his disciples discouraged those bringing the children to him. “*Indignant*” is a strong term, meaning *“very upset”* or *“feeling or showing anger at what is perceived as unfair treatment.”* His voice went up high to get their attention, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these!”

Why was Jesus so upset? His spiritually immature disciples often made mistakes. But Jesus didn’t always get upset whenever they were making mistakes. He was patient and willing to instruct them. Yet, this time he got agitated because their behavior revealed their deep-seated and distorted view of little children, which could cause them emotional and spiritual damage. Unless Jesus pointed it out, his disciples would not have known their internal problems.

 The disciples had a long way to grow and be changed as Jesus’ disciples if they were to become future spiritual leaders. For example, Jesus instructed them that if anyone would be his disciple, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him (8:34). Yet, instead of trying to humble themselves and serve others, they tried to take a higher position, often competing, and arguing among themselves about who would be the greatest in the coming kingdom of God. (9:33-37) They also forbade a man from driving out demons in the name of Jesus because the man didn’t belong to their group. (9:38-41) They were proud and exclusive with their little power, authority, and experience with Jesus. Their spiritual quality was not so good.

 However, taking the opportunity, Jesus taught them invaluable spiritual lessons. Look at verse 14b again. “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Here, Jesus told his disciples something they had never heard or thought of. Their view of God’s kingdom was political, like David’s powerful kingdom in history. But Jesus said that God’s kingdom belonged to such little children who came to him. I believe that his disciples were taken aback.

How could little children possess God’s kingdom without money, power, skills, knowledge, or experiences? Well, the kingdom Jesus told them about was not a political kingdom but a spiritual one, which no man can establish, but only God can through the work of the Messiah. That’s why Jesus came and was about to give himself as the ultimate sacrifice on the cross for the sin of the world. And what is so fantastic about this kingdom is that it’s accessible to anyone who trusts in God’s love and mercy, like the little children who came to Jesus just as they were. That’s why Jesus said, “For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” (14b)

In verse 15, Jesus further elaborates on his point. Let’s read verse 15. “Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” In the previous statement, Jesus said that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these (14b). Then he repeated the same thing negatively, “Truly I tell you, anyone who **will not** receive the kingdom of God like a little child **will never** enter it.” Jesus used double negative words **(will not & will never)** to stress his point.

When Jesus used the term “the kingdom of God,” he didn’t mean that the kingdom of God is just a nice place where we go after we die. When a great American evangelist passed away a few years ago, his son shared a eulogy that included the statement: “*My father didn’t die. He simply changed his address.”* I thought it was an excellent way to view our physical death. Yet, on the other hand, I thought the kingdom of God was more than just a nice place we go after we die. When Jesus used the term “the kingdom of God” in today’s passage, it referred to the spiritual reality of eternal life, which is within us now, the rest of our lives, and beyond. Eternal life, or God’s kingdom, never stops but continues now and forever. It’s a spiritual reality, invisible but real.

John 3:16 states, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Let me ask you a question. What do you think eternal life is? Do you think eternal life is simply never dying but living endlessly? But we don’t want to live endlessly in boredom in heaven. If that’s eternal life, I wonder if I like that kind of eternal life. It should get better and more exciting, never dull. I believe that the kingdom of God is much more exciting than many of us think it is. And it’s a mystery.

But how would we know if eternal life is good unless we experience it? Of course, experience is not everything, but it’s essential. That’s why Jesus invited his first disciples by saying, “Come, and you will see.” (Jn. 1:39) They followed Jesus and experienced a new life in Christ. One of them was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, and told him, “We have found the Messiah!” (Jn. 1:41)

The kingdom of God or eternal life is like a hidden treasure to be discovered by us. When are we going to find it? It’s now. Not just once but forever. So, how can we experience eternal life and the kingdom of God? It’s not just becoming emotionally high or having supernatural experiences, like miraculous healings or mysterious dreams.

Then what did Jesus say about it? Read verse 15 again. “Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” It’s helpful if we read a similar statement made in Matthew. On a different occasion, Jesus said something like what he said in verse 15, “Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt. 18:3b)

Most people think they can experience God’s kingdom by changing the external world or our circumstances. But according to Jesus, we can experience God’s kingdom or eternal life by changing our inner self. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 18:3b)

This reminds us of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John Chapter 3. Jesus told Nicodemus, who came to visit at night, “Very truly I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’” (3:3) Nicodemus had no clue of what Jesus was talking about being born again. So he asked Jesus, “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely, they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” (3:4) Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” (3:5) What most Jews in Jesus’ time, including Nicodemus, longed for was external change. They believed that they could experience God’s kingdom through external change or the change of their current circumstances. But Jesus told Nicodemus that it’s through internal change that one can experience God’s kingdom and eternal life.

Mahatma Gandhi, a lawyer and an anti-colonial nationalist in India, who employed non-violent resistance, was believed to have said, *“Be the change you wish to see in the world.”* I heard he was an avid Bible reader. I think he learned the importance of internal change as a solution for the change of the world from Christ Jesus. Of course, things should change. Yet, external change without internal change does not bring us to heaven and genuine happiness. That’s one reason Paul said in Romans 12:2, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”

As followers of Christ, we should be changed inwardly and become like little children. Otherwise, we cannot truly experience God’s kingdom and eternal life in us. Some of the positive characteristics of little children include simple trust, obedience, endless curiosity, innocence-genuineness, forgiveness, etc. As adults, we’ve lost so many good qualities. That’s why we should become like little child or be born again.

***How can a grown person change and become like a little child?*** Of course, it does not mean that we become childish. One of the most effective ways to achieve internal change and transformation is repentance. As Jesus launched the messianic ministry in Galilee, he proclaimed by saying, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mk 1:15)

The meaning of the original Greek word for repentance ***(metanoia)*** is a change of one’s mind, as Paul said, ***“renewing of our mind.”*** We might temporarily change our outward behaviors like stop drinking, partying, immoral, or other wrong behaviors. Changing one’s external behaviors is good but not good enough. Changing one’s outward behavior may be easier than changing one’s internal problems, such as hidden pride, egocentrism, ulterior motives, negative thoughts, distorted values, bitterness, unforgiveness, etc.

Sometimes, we are blind to see the large plank in our eyes while pointing fingers at others for the speck in their eyes (Pic#2). Even though internal problems are more serious problems, they are hard to detect because they are like germs. It’s also hard to detect because we tend to ignore them. Spiritual blindness is a serious problem for most people, including Christians. Therefore, as Christian disciples, we must intentionally pay attention to our internal problems through a microscopic examination of our inner selves so that we can be transformed and become new people. (Pic #3)

We don’t become a new creation simply by changing our outward behavior or becoming more religious. We need to change from the inside out. We need a solemn self-examination. One of the best ways of self-examination is meditating on God’s words. Hebrews 4:12 states, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

Look at verse 16. “And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them, and blessed them.” I used to teach CBF children a song, *“Jesus truly loves 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.”*

 Let’s conclude the sermon. Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!” It shows that the Christian life is a life-long process of becoming a new creation. Although it’s not an easy process, it’s truly gratifying. Through internal change and transformation, we can experience the kingdom of God and everlasting life daily for the rest of our lives and forever. Once we become adults, we tend to grow old and become rigid and stagnant. We like the way it is. But the kingdom of God belongs to those who become a new creation through repentance and faith in the grace of forgiveness of sins in Jesus.

The world is full of problems. We often become upset and disappointed by what’s happening in the world. We eagerly long for change in the world. So there is a popular song called *“Heal the World”* by M.J. How can we make the world a better place? The world will improve when we become a new creation. We try to change others, husbands, children, parents, Bible students, etc. But that does not work. We need to change first. We become new parents, new spouses, new children, new teachers, new doctors and nurses, new missionaries, pastors, etc. This week, let us make a small step toward becoming a new creation in Christ and the change we wish to see in the world, beginning with family and community.