

Father Knows Best? Luke 18 ZCC 10.20.13

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I was thinking about TV from a few years ago. One of the things that stands out the most is how smart the parents were and how they always knew exactly how to handle any problem. Leave It To Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet, and Father Knows Best stand out most of all. Ward always knew what to do or say to get the grades up or help win the ball game and so did Ozzie—and on Father Knows Best, you knew that in the end Father really would know the best answer to any problem.

We adults are so smart aren't we? There is nothing we can't figure out if we really try. If our children and grandchildren would just listen, then we could set them straight in all things—things of the mind and of the heart and of the spirit. If they would just listen to us and do as we say—because Father (and Mother) knows best.

Yet , in some sense, Jesus just contradicted that in the passage we just read. Sounds like, in some things, it is the children who know best.

Did you ever wonder what that little short passage meant? I'll bet you have. I have. Let me read verse 17 again, because that is the part that really causes me to wonder.

Most certainly, I tell you, whoever doesn't receive God's Kingdom like a little child, he will in no way enter into it." (WEB)

That is a pretty powerful warning. It is so stern that I think we OUGHT to spend some time trying to figure out what it might mean.

Jesus says that unless we receive the kingdom of God as a little child, then we won't receive it at all. What does it mean to you and me? How can we be sure, since Jesus didn't elaborate? I guess we have to dig a bit.

When I think about scripture and how to apply it to our lives, I think about context. Where did the passage come from and what was happening just before and just after it?

The reality is that I believe the REAL context of any passage is the whole Bible—and that we cannot pull any of it out of the whole and expect it to stand totally alone. We have to constantly seek to study and know the whole Scripture. Still, we don't have time to cover THAT kind of context today, but we can look at the passages directly before and directly after. Maybe in those brackets or

bookends we can find some clues to what Jesus was talking about.

Lets read Luke 18:9-14: *9 He spoke also this parable to certain people who were convinced of their own righteousness, and who despised all others. 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed to himself like this: 'God, I thank you, that I am not like the rest of men, extortionists, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far away, wouldn't even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."* (WEB)

Here we have two men, both are very self-conscious—the first is conscious of his good deeds and of his relative rank compared to the other man—and others in general. The second is conscious of his sin and his failures and of the greatness of God. Certainly, the last verse, verse 14, is the clue to this short parable: *14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."* (WEB)

So, according to verse 14—the parable is about humility and/or the lack of it. Humility before God seems to be the order of the day, if you want to be justified or made right before the Creator. The one who was not justified was clinging to his religion instead of God. He was counting on himself and his ability to keep God's rules to make sure that he entered into the kingdom of God. The one who was justified—made right and whole before God—came in humility and an awareness of his sin and of the greatness of God.

There is another bookend right after the one about the children. I believe this one also gives us a clue to receiving the kingdom as a little children. This one is not a parable, it is something that happened. Maybe the bringing of the children interrupted Jesus' teaching and we can imagine that the next passage happened right after that. At any rate—even if these things didn't happen in this chronological order, Luke and God chose to put these three things back-to-back.

So, here is our next clue to understanding what it means to receive the Kingdom as a little child.

Luke 18:18-25: *18 A certain ruler asked him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 19 Jesus asked him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good, except one—God. 20 You know the commandments: 'Don't commit adultery,' 'Don't murder,' 'Don't steal,' 'Don't give false testimony,' 'Honor your father and your mother.'" 21 He said, "I have observed all these things from my*

youth up.” 22 When Jesus heard these things, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have, and distribute it to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven. Come, follow me.” 23 But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was very rich. 24 Jesus, seeing that he became very sad, said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter into God’s Kingdom! 25 For it is easier for a camel to enter in through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter into God’s Kingdom.” (WEB)

So, here we have a man who wants to have eternal life. He has done all the right things. He has conscientiously kept the commandments from the time he understood them. Still, he is afraid that being “good enough” by the standards of his religion is not really enough—so here we find him seeking out Jesus. Smart man. He recognized something that many in this world never see—that we can’t keep the rules well enough to be righteous before a perfect God.

BUT there is a problem, isn’t there? What is it? I can tell you what it is not—he is not being Pharisaic. Like I said, he was not trusting the rules and trusting that he is good enough—and I say, “good for him!” He was moving in the right direction. What **WAS** the problem? Even though he was sorry, he left—so He didn’t **REALLY** want to enter into the kingdom of God, did he? Well, he did—but he was so conscious of “things” that he couldn’t let go and let Jesus be Lord of his life.

So, here we have things—or love of things getting in the way of a relationship with God—getting in the way of entering the kingdom of God.

So, here are the bookends—the context of our passage—

One: we have a parable about two men. Both of them are seeking the kingdom of God and both are praying to God. One is conscious of himself and his evilness and God’s greatness. He is humbled and he is empty, bringing nothing to God but his humility. The other man is conscious of his religious nature and his ability to keep the rules of his religion. He is more conscious of his standing before fallen men than he is his standing before a righteous God. The first of the two was made just or right in God’s eyes.

Two: we have a man who understands that religious beliefs and keeping the rules is a good thing—but that it isn’t enough, so he seeks out Jesus. He asks the great teacher, the Son of God, how to get into the kingdom of God. Jesus can see that there is something in the way—or we might say “many things” in the way, because it is his wealth that he is clinging to—so he asks the man to get rid of it.

The man cannot or will not and goes away sorrowful. Then Jesus goes on to tell his followers that it is very hard for those who have riches to enter into the kingdom.

OK—bear with me and lets go back to our original passage: *15 They were also bringing their babies to him, that he might touch them. But when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. 16 Jesus summoned them, saying, “Allow the little*

children to come to me, and don't hinder them, for God's Kingdom belongs to such as these. 17 Most certainly, I tell you, whoever doesn't receive God's Kingdom like a little child, he will in no way enter into it." (WEB)

What is it that children know that we adults don't know? Did you ever play a game with a small child? Even better, did you ever play a game that they made up? Are the rules all written down and set in stone? No, they are fluid. In fact, if the child starts to lose, they may change the rules. Nothing wrong with that in their minds, because they know it is not about the rules, it is about the game and the people involved.

The man who was counting on his ability to keep the rules didn't understand that. It is natural to want to look at the Ten Commandments or other Bible teachings and want to measure ourselves against others.

We want to look at the rules only—BUT Christ says it is all about our relationships and about our love for God and each other.

He says that murder is a symptom—that hatred or lack of love is the real problem. Jesus told us that what is important is our lives and how we live them and how that connects us to God and others in loving relationships. The rules are important, but relationship to God and others comes first.

So, the first bookend tells us not to get stuck in the rules and miss the one who loves us no matter what we have done and no matter who we are. Children do just that. The children who were brought to Jesus weren't necessarily honoring him "correctly" they weren't worried about the rules at all—they just knew instinctively that Jesus loves them and that he cares.

Children also have lives uncluttered by stuff—although we are trying to change that. When I was a kid, my cousins and I played cops and robbers and cowboys and Indians and all of that. We also played driving games. I can tell you for sure that most of us didn't have any cap-guns or any toy bows or any headdresses. We pretended. When we played driving games, WE were the cars and trucks—loud engines, squealing tires and all. We were not "about" stuff—we were about the game and about fun.

The man we call the rich young ruler let his stuff get in the way. Children don't do that. They know that love and relationship is more important than the rules and more important than stuff.

So—if we have to come into the kingdom as children—then you and I need to consciously make sure that we are not counting on the wrong things.

Our keeping of the rules will not be enough. We cannot look "good" before a perfect God. The first bookend tells us that it is when we come to God in humility

and in awe of his being that we are justified or made right before God

Our "stuff" won't get us to heaven—in fact, it may keep us from knowing how to get there. Why is that? Because we have to come to Jesus as children—leaving our "stuff" out of it. We may be able to depend on money and stuff to keep us warm and keep us fed and keep us from living on the street—but it won't get us into the kingdom.

If we are to inherit the kingdom of God, Jesus says we must receive it as little children.

If we widen out and look at the context of the passage, then there are some slues in that context. We have to come to him just as we are—in awe and in humility. It won't matter if we show him a good report card—it won't be good enough. We have to let go of all our stuff. We can keep it, but we can't allow it to get in the way of his Lordship.