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Such as These

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“Lead us not to temptation.” Perhaps this is a poetic way of saying, “God if you don’t lead me I will surely cut my own path and run straight into evil.” We are saying we cannot go through the day thinking we will survive by our own spiritual muscle. We need help; we need direction, and redirection. We need restraint and we need deliverance from the consequence of evil. The prayer then is a call for rescue from the love of sin. My experience has been that this is not a one-time prayer, any more than my need for bread is a one-time thing.

It seems important to me that all the lines of the prayer are intricately related. And it is all about our dependence. We are too weak to make it on our own, and the good news is, God’s own son says, “Here, I will help you, pray this prayer.”

We come to church to hear again who we are and to whom we belong. We belong to a God who sent his son to say, “Speak to God, he is listening.” We have not been thrust on this journey of life by a God who pushes back and says, “I hope you make it.” No, our God says, “Speak—I’m listening.”



Such As These

BETH BOWERS

Beth Bowers is a graduate student in New Testament at Rochester College in Michigan. She presented this sermon in a homiletics class on November 14, 2006.

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. 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. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10.13–16, NIV).

It’s quite a concept: the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is near. The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. This is what the kingdom of God is like. What shall we say the kingdom of God is like? The kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! You are not far from the kingdom of God.

What is the kingdom of God? Is it the far off eschatological reign of God, or was it Jesus’ ministry on earth? Or, is it God’s presence within the church now? Whatever the full answer may be, what we do see is that the kingdom of God is essential in the world imagined in Mark’s Gospel, and it seems to be inextricably linked to the identity of Jesus.¹

The fundamental question in Mark’s narrative centers around the identity of Jesus: Who am I? And in this whirlwind of narrative, miracles, and teaching Mark begs the question from us in return: Who are we? It is unfair, you know—we get the inside scoop with these questions. We know the beginning, we know the end, and Mark gives us great directions for the journey. We have the benefit of knowing from the very beginning that he is “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1.1). We know that “He has risen. He is not here” (16.6). We know, too, that “whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant” (10.43). And I think that is where Mark wants to take us in this journey today.

Now, as is usual in Mark’s narrative, the disciples just didn’t get it. Their confusion about the elusive kingdom of God was greater than ours. And Jesus takes time (and time and time again) to show them, tell

1. Frederick Aquino notes that the concept of kingdom is “inextricably linked in the person of Jesus” in his essay, “Mark and Becoming Fully Human,” in *Preaching Mark’s Unsettling Messiah*, eds. David Fleer and David Bland (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 59-71.

them about his kingdom. Jesus' ministry is coming to a close. He is on his way to Jerusalem; he knows his time is quickly approaching, and the kingdom is closer to his heart than ever. He has predicted his death twice already, and the disciples repeatedly respond inappropriately. They are ready to be the trusted sidekicks to their "superhero" Jesus whom they think has come to save the day from villainous Rome—march in, take over, set up shop. Can't you see it? James and John, fighting for position of "Robin," second in command to their "Batman" Jesus. But Jesus reminds them that the first will be last in his kingdom—that his kingdom requires a life of service and sacrifice, not honor and glory. And that is where we land in our text.

These few verses raise several good questions: Why were people bringing their little children to Jesus? Why did the disciples turn them away? Why was Jesus angry with them? In light of our kingdom context, in light of the question posed by Jesus, "Who am I?" and to shed light on our response to Jesus' question with another question, "Who are we?", I'd invite us to settle down and spend some time with Mark considering what it means to be "such as these."

Please, Mark, tell us more! What did Jesus mean? Mark seems to make the point, time and again, that the heart of the kingdom is found in unexpected places and through unexpected people. In this story, the little children are those "least likely" people. The little ones described here are truly the smallest of children. I think part of what makes them so unexpected is simply the fact that they are literally the "least." They are small, helpless, needy, and quite unable to make it on their own. But even more than this, Jesus sees something in the hearts of these little ones that he wants us to see.

Now, let's be honest. There are attributes children have that may make us question Jesus a little bit here. Aren't children selfish? Aren't they completely self-centered? Don't they deliberately disobey and then lie to cover it up? Well, yes . . . they can be and yes, sometimes they do. But I'm not sure this is what Jesus was getting at.

I asked some good friends what they thought about Jesus' words about children. I received replies from mothers, fathers, teachers, grandmas, and preachers.² A common thread throughout their responses was the idea of a child's trust, faith, simplicity, ability to forgive, honesty, and purity. My friend Brenda, a special education teacher, shared her thoughts rather poignantly:

I believe that children have some qualities early in life that are often twisted and thwarted by the devil in those of us who have grown older. One of the most important qualities is authenticity. Children have not yet had the world batter and bend the spirit that God gave them into something else that the world might find more "acceptable." They are honest, brave, willing to take a risk, willing to learn something new, willing to be taught and molded by those who have more experience, and willing to always give you another chance to do good. They will forgive and forgive and forgive even the most chillingly hateful and neglectful parent. They will share too little food with a younger sibling, or curl up in your lap and hold you through the deepest depression. They will always reach out first, and ask what risk or cost it will have for them later. They say things that we are all thinking. This sometimes makes us adults cringe at the brutal honesty found in what they have observed. It often makes us confront our own lacking example to them.

Truly the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I have to ask myself: Is my heart one that is moldable? Do I speak truth and forget wrongs before I even have the chance to forgive? Do I truly have a heart authentically seeking Jesus? Do you? And isn't that really where our faith journey lands at the end of each day? A child is completely dependent on someone else to meet his or her every need. Children realize that they need someone in their lives to care for them, and they desperately want to be close to that person—

2. A special thanks to my friends, my community of interpretation, my "scholarly seminar" for their thoughts and ideas around this text: Kellie Raper, Brenda Peeler, Josh Graves, Larry Stewart, Tom Rellinger, Lynne Stewart, Shannon Williams, Rubel Shelly, and Janet Tarrant.

for their lives depend on it.

I have a good friend who told me a story about his three-year-old son, Derek. Little Derek would often sing himself to sleep, and especially at that age, he would sing out just as loud as he could. My friend would often tiptoe down the hallway and sit at the bottom of the stairs just to listen to him. Derek would sing songs he learned in Sunday school or songs he heard his parents singing around the house or playing from a CD. But every once in a while, he would just sing what he was thinking or feeling—almost like a three-year-old writing a song, or even singing a prayer. One night he went on at length about how much he wanted to be close to God, addressing him in first person, and saying over and over again how he wanted to be close to him and see what he looks like. And at one point, little Derek sang out as loud as he possibly could, “I just wanna be close to you, I just wanna see you, Jesus!”

Oh for the heart of a child. A child knows just how needy he is, and he isn’t afraid to ask for—even cry out for—help. A child can accept the gift of the kingdom for what it actually is without thoughts of earning or deserving it. She knows she needs it—and she knows she needs the one who freely gives it. Indeed, the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.



Perfect Righteousness

JENNIFER THWEATT-BATES

Jennifer’s ministry began with work in China through the organization China Now! She received her M.A. in theology at Abilene Christian University and is currently ABD at Princeton Theological Seminary in the area of theology and science. She preaches and teaches on occasion for Christ’s Church in Brooklyn, New York.

This sermon was originally preached at West Islip Church of Christ on August 14, 2005.

And Jesus left there, withdrew into the area of Tyre and Sidon. And, would you believe it, a Canaanite woman from that region came and cried out, saying, “Have mercy on me, Son of David! My daughter is evilly possessed.” And he answered her not one word. And the disciples coming to him asked him, saying, “Send her away, because she’s making a scene.” And he answered, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered and said, “It is not right to take the bread of the children and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” Then Jesus answered, “Woman, great is your faith! May it be as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that hour (Matt 15.21–28, the author’s translation).

Ever embarrassed to admit you’re a church-going, Bible-believing Christian? Let me just say that there are days when I’d really rather keep quiet about this fact. TV preachers, national news stories about megachurch preachers’ scandals, and *The Revealer* furnish enough embarrassment material that some days I wish I were just an inoffensive Buddhist, or something.

Matthew’s story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman actually sounds like a story you might read in *The Revealer*, a story about a TV evangelist/healer who walks around the streets of New York City, tight-lipped and clench-jawed, ignoring the bag lady shouting desperately after him, “Help me! Help me!” Not a stellar moment for Christianity. Not a stellar moment for Jesus, either.

It’s one thing to be embarrassed by a TV preacher shouting some nonsense about prayer hankies. It’s quite another to be embarrassed by your very own Lord, the Son of God, Jesus himself. And we’re presented with an embarrassment in this text. Suppose this were you, walking down the street with a woman shouting “help me” following after you. You’d say to yourself, “What would Jesus do? Jesus would help this woman.” But forget it! Not even Jesus is doing WWJD. Jesus ignores this woman. The disciples aren’t any better;