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On Blessing Children

By Dan Anders

Do you wish, as I do, that you knew a lot more about the Bible? I frequently find myself pondering some biblical text, wishing I could read between the lines to see what really happened—what the writer truly meant. I am not referring to some difficult exegetical problem—Paul’s allusion to baptism for the dead or Peter’s discussion of spirits in prison. I would include in my wish list some more tangible events. I wonder how it actually looked when Jesus multiplied a boy’s sack lunch, or what was said when Paul confronted Peter in Antioch. I think it would be great if we could drop into Jeremiah’s dungeon, or if we could know more about Esau’s feelings of rejection. Wouldn’t it be exciting to know the “rest of the story” of that nighttime visit of Jesus and Nicodemus? What went on when John Mark returned to Jerusalem from the first preaching tour with Paul and Barnabas? We cannot know the answers, of course. Any imagined answers need to be recognized as pure fiction or, more generously put, as sanctified imagination.

Jesus and the Children

One of my greatest desires would be to know more about what happened when Jesus encountered little children. The synoptic texts (Matt 19:13–15; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17) fill in the bare outline. Unnamed people, almost certainly the parents, were bringing children (Luke has “babies,” NIV) to Jesus. They brought them so that Jesus could “place his hands on them and pray for them” (Matt 19:13). As we well know, the

disciples took exception to this action. The reason for their rebuke to those bringing the children is, however, one of those unknown factors. Did they resent this intrusion on their master’s valuable time? Did they think that children were unworthy of his attention? The culture of their day certainly deemed it inappropriate for children to occupy such a prominent status in public space.

Whatever their reasons, the disciples were vigorous in their objections. The word *epitimaō*, describing their complaints, is used often in the Gospels. Jesus “rebuked” raging winds and waves (Matt 8:26), a demon which cruelly controlled a young boy (Matt 17:18), and the fever in Peter’s mother-in-law (Luke 4:39). Surely these were not calm, softly spoken protests. Even more instructive are the “rebukes” administered by Peter to Jesus when Jesus predicted his coming suffering, and by Jesus to Peter for his blundering denseness (Mark 8:31, 32). Jesus’ rebuke is verbalized in the strongest language: “Out of my sight, Satan! You do not mind the things of God, but the things of men.” When the disciples rebuked those bringing the children to Jesus, they showed that they were greatly disturbed by this perceived abuse of Jesus’ time and energy. They said so in no uncertain terms!

Jesus’ response to them was hardly mild. He was clearly displeased with their attitudes and actions. His “indignation” (*aganakteō*) may be better appreciated by comparing it with the emotion felt by the ten when James and John requested prominent places in God’s

kingdom (Matt 20:24). In the same vein, Jewish leaders were aggravated and “indignant” with Jesus for his actions (see Matt 21:15; Luke 13:14). “Let the children come to me,” Jesus said. “Do not hinder them.” He did not want the children or infants to be kept away (*koluo*) from him. The same verb is used in Mark 9:38, 39. The disciples “hindered” a man outside their circle who was exorcising demons, and Jesus retorted that they should not “stop him.” Jewish leaders not only rejected the kingdom for themselves, they also “hindered” others from accepting God’s rule through Jesus (Luke 11:52). Diotrophes similarly refused “to welcome the brothers” and also “stop[ped] (*koluie*) those who want[ed] to do so” (3 John 9, 10).

Jesus did not want his disciples to treat children like this. His response to their insensitivity was not, however, limited to a negative indignant rebuke. He also modeled what he felt was appropriate action toward these little ones. Mark’s account may be the vivid recollection of an apostolic eyewitness: “And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them” (Mark 10:16).

At that point the camera stopped rolling. We do not know how long this interplay took or what words Jesus used to bless the children. Did he say anything more to them? Was there some further action or word that would fill out the picture? I wish I knew. We are left, in my judgment, with many tantalizing questions about precisely what occurred.

“Of Such is the Kingdom”

Jesus definitely had a high regard for children. His respect is shown by his actions here. Moreover, his words strongly underscore how he felt. “For of such as these is the kingdom of God!” The words still take our breath away. Scholars continue to debate his meaning. In what sense are kingdom people to be like children? My purpose is not to enter that debate. I simply want to note the unvarnished regard that Jesus had for children. They were important! “Of such is God’s rule.” Little children did matter to Jesus.

How would Jesus treat children today? Obviously, this Gospel paragraph is of decisive importance in answering that question. It tells us, quite simply and directly, that Jesus had such high regard for youngsters that he made time for them. He welcomed them. He held them. He touched them. He blessed them. This precise sequence of actions is mentioned of no other people except children. Jesus did something for children that he is not recorded as doing for anyone else.

Brazen as it may seem, I want to suggest that the Gospels’ picture really is only a partial one. I think there is the likelihood that Jesus said something directly to the children, not just about them. Here is the master storyteller of all time in close contact with some who like stories most. It is at least conceivable that Jesus might have told them a story. If we had stood there, we might have heard Jesus say something like this: “I want to tell you about God in heaven. He is like your *Abba*. He takes care of you. He gives you food and drink. He protects you.” Or he could have said: “Have you ever seen a shepherd? Well, God is like a shepherd. He does for each of you what a shepherd does for his sheep. He scares away the wolves. He nurses you when you are sick. He watches you when you are asleep.” I would like to think that the one who is the way and truth and life would have wanted to share that real living way with these little ones for whom he cared so much.

Children and Public Worship

We know that children were a vital part of family worship in Jewish homes. The passover celebration made a special place for children (Exod 13:14). Jesus himself, as a boy, attended festivals in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41–50). We do not know as much about how male children would have been included in public ritual at temple or synagogue. Given the culture of advanced agrarian societies, children, like women, would have been largely excluded from the public domain. As interesting as it might be to know what Jewish public worship was like, that worship is not determinative for Christian behavior in the church. We seek the mind of Christ. We want to treat children as Jesus himself would have treated them.

It does not take much reflection to realize that traditional worship today affords little place for children. Everything about the assembly is “grown up.” From the size of the pews to the content of the liturgy, we design our corporate worship times for adults. Most churches never even sing a children’s hymn in public worship! If there is any place in modern culture where children must feel totally excluded, it is in our Lord’s day worship assembly. I wonder whether Jesus would think that our worship “hinders” or “blesses” the children.

About fifteen years ago, some of these notions “troubled the waters” of my soul. I began to feel that we needed, in some concrete way, to include children in our church worship times. I felt that we could do more than we were doing in our corporate worship to bring the little ones to Jesus. I had a few models in my memory.

It does not take much reflection to realize that traditional worship to day affords little place for children.

I remembered early efforts by some ministers whom I had observed in my childhood. The beloved evangelist C. E. McGaughey had a program for children each night of his gospel meetings. Children were invited to the front pews to be “Pew Packers.” Brother McGaughey, in his gentle way, would ask them questions and tell them a Bible story. Joe Malone was another pioneer. With his artistic skill, he did inimitable “Chalk Talks” for children. With a few strokes of his chalk, brother Malone enchanted children and adults alike with simple Bible truths.

Important as such efforts were, they still did not exactly do what I felt needed to be done. They were, in effect, extrinsic to the worship time. The talks were deliberately placed at the start, “before the worship,” in our precise chronology. Children were indeed objects of special attention and teaching, but they were not intrinsic to the worship experience. I was aware that some religious traditions had a “Children’s Sermon,” a short lesson geared to the minds of youngsters, often included in Sunday worship. Usually this was done by churches that stressed child membership, although some believer’s baptism groups also had the practice. The idea intrigued me—something in the worship, done by the preaching minister, specifically for children. With much fear and trembling, I began to experiment with attempts at including a Children’s Sermon in our congregation’s Sunday morning worship. At first I was entirely on my own for ideas and resources. Later, I discovered that books of sermons for children are available!

Several considerations have informed my practice from that day until now:

(1) The Children’s Sermon is an intrinsic part of the total worship experience. I believe that the attitude of Jesus toward children validates our including them in the life of the Christian community. Since worship is the heartbeat of the church’s larger life, we should design some worship experiences specifically for them. Our worship should be a blessing, not a hindrance, to our own youth. My practice, therefore, has been to integrate my Children’s Sermon within the larger worship assembly. It is neither a forethought, nor an afterthought. It is an integral component of the total experience. In the

congregations I have served recently, our practice is to have a separate children’s worship time during the adult sermon three Sundays a month. I have usually preached a Children’s Sermon on the Sunday that the children remain with the adult congregation, for the whole assembly.

(2) I make an honest attempt to direct the children’s message to them, not simply to use it as a gimmick for the adult worshippers. To be sure, adults have commented on occasion that they got more out of the lesson for the children than from the adult message! Still, as a matter of integrity, I am really trying to teach children. As much as possible, I want to “tune out” the adult congregation.

(3) I believe that the message should have theological integrity, geared to the level of small children. The Children’s Sermon is not a “break” in the service to entertain wiggly ones with a diversion. I make a genuine effort to be biblically accurate and theologically solid in even my simplest presentations.

(4) I gear the language and length of the message to the special limitations of the children. Although I may deal with some weighty theological truth, the message must be communicated briefly and clearly. Obviously, not everything can be said that one might want to say in a fully developed discussion for adults. I must speak in childlike terms to childlike attention spans. One thing that helps me do this is to use simple objects that engage the children’s attention and help to illustrate my point.

(5) Whenever possible, my Children’s Sermon is integrated with the theme of the larger worship assembly and is complementary to the adult sermon. If adults’ and children’s sermons are cohesive, the children are pulled still more into the orbit of the worshipping community. There is even the chance that they will get something from the adults’ lesson.

(6) As with the adult message, I prefer to make my Children’s Sermon an original response of my own spirit to God’s Spirit. Of course, like most preachers, I sometimes pick up an idea, forget where I got it, and later use it as my own. I rarely tell a Bible story for the Children’s Sermon, although many regularly use that approach. I want what I do for the children to have the same creative touch as does my adult message.

(7) I also try to unite the message with something that matters to the children. Immediacy is an important consideration. A preacher who tries to talk to children about anything but Jesus’ birth at Christmas is brave indeed! Sometimes the message dovetails with current congregational interests. Our church left its old build-

ing to merge with another congregation, so I used a suitcase to talk about the pain and fear and exciting possibilities of moving. When I was fighting cancer in 1989, I explained what was happening to me to the children so they would be less frightened by it.

Sample Sermons for Children

I offer the following samples to provide some grist to get your own mill grinding. I do not think that they are particularly notable. With a little creative effort, you can come up with your own messages that will speak effectively to children.

“What God Does with Our Bad Things”

(Props: chalkboard, chalk, and eraser)

All of us do bad things sometimes—at least I know that I do. I want what belongs to somebody else. Or I would like to hurt someone. I may be mean and ugly to another person. Sometimes I do not tell the truth. Most often, I am just plain selfish.

The Bible has a little word for all the bad things I am and all the bad things I do. The Bible calls it “sin.” Sin is ugly to God. It makes him very sad.

Only one good thing can happen when we sin. We can let God “forgive” us for what we have done wrong. Forgiveness is a really big word. I want to show you what forgiveness means.

All of you know what an eraser is for. You draw something with chalk on the board, but sometimes you make a mistake and want to start over. So, you use an eraser to wipe away the crooked line or the ugly picture or the misspelled word. That’s what God does when he forgives us. He erases the wrong that we have done so no one can ever see it again.

Christians believe that God’s eraser is named Jesus. God lets his Son wipe away all the bad things we have ever done. It is good to be forgiven by God, isn’t it?

“God’s Lights”

(Props: flashlight filled with Styrofoam bits; batteries)

Have you ever used a flashlight? Then you know what a big help one can be. It can show a path in the woods at night. A flashlight in the dark can keep us from getting hurt. It is a really great thing to have when you need light.

Jesus said that people who follow him are the “light of the world.” If we love Jesus, we are like flashlights. We help show the way to God. Your light can keep the world from being a dark and dangerous place.

But something is wrong with this flashlight. When I press the switch, it doesn’t shine. Let’s open it up to see what’s wrong. (Pour out the confetti or bits of Styrofoam.) Well, look at that! Something is inside that doesn’t belong.

When our light doesn’t shine for God, we may have trash inside of us. We can think so many mean or ugly thoughts that the light won’t work. God wants to help us clean out all the bad things from our lives.

This light still won’t work. Something else is wrong. The flashlight needs batteries, doesn’t it? It needs some power inside so the light will shine. (Put batteries in and demonstrate that the light works.)

We need power in us to make our lights shine. Jesus is God’s battery in our lives. If we keep Jesus in our hearts, we will always glow for God.

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