

Time of Grace Ministry
Surprising Love: Babies! Seriously!
September 11, 2011
Luke 18:15-17

Let me ask you something today – in the place where you live, have you ever had any contact with the juvenile justice system?

I asked my congregation that once and asked them to raise their hands if they had had any contact with the system. And I was kind of surprised to see at least one-third, closer to one half of the people acknowledge some kind of experience. They were at a hearing or somebody in their family or extended family was involved with the justice system in some way. And it's an odd world, honestly. It's a very strange place to be because the rules and the goals seem so murky.

It wasn't always that way in our country. In the first couple of hundred years of our nation's existence there weren't two systems of justice. There was just the law and there were no breaks given to kids. But starting in the 1800s during the Industrial Revolution, child labor laws began to be set in place because of children who were being exploited. They were being forced and pressured because of their impoverished parents to work in factories or work out in fields. Their childhood was stolen from them. They never had a chance to go to school because of the terrible financial need. They were put to work on machines or sent to work out in fields. So child labor laws were instituted. And at about the same time child legal protections also began to appear and I think the first codifications of those were in Cook County, Chicago, in the 1890s. And now today, there isn't a jurisdiction anywhere in America where there are not essentially two systems of justice – a system for adults starting at age eighteen, and a completely different juvenile system for children seventeen and under; for those who are considered legally minors.

Now if you're ten or under, you will never be detained. You will be placed in some kind of foster care or become a ward of the state. But what to do with teenagers who have committed crimes is really a vexing dilemma. What do you do with them? The system is very different. First of all, hearings for minors – they're called juveniles – are closed. You can only be in there to listen if you are part of the legal system such as the prosecution or defense or if you are a close family member.

The second thing is all those records are also sealed. You cannot get access to them as you would even if there was a conviction on the basis of a normal crime. And the third very significant thing is that if you look at the websites of various systems, the community systems, the government is not interested in merely prosecuting crime and protection of victims, but they also in a sense view these juvenile perps as victims, too, and they will explicitly say, "We are here to protect the child," even if that child is an offender. And you might think, "Hmm." So clearly, as far as the law is concerned, our country does not really view juvenile offenders as completely responsible for their actions. This is a big problem! Did you know that at least one-third of all thefts and larcenies are committed by people under the age of seventeen? Did you know that fifty-four percent of the people who are arrested for arson in America are seventeen or under? So this is a nut that's never going to be cracked; it's a very difficult issue.

Now my main interest in this is not just to banter on with stories about juvenile court systems, but it's God's system that I'm primarily interested in talking about with you today because on Judgment Day there will be no juvie system in place. Nobody can say to God, "Hey, you can't blame me for that stuff. I'm just a kid!" Or, "I died when I was ten. Hey, I get in free because I'm a kid." In God's eyes there is only one system. His laws apply to everybody. And this is a difficult thing you and I got to talk about.

And yet, I know this sounds like a harsher way to describe it, or maybe a little sarcastic – but I understand why many Christians do not really bust themselves bringing their children to the Lord Jesus. They don't think they're at an age of accountability yet. So they're assuming there are juvie rules for children and that only when you're older do you have to start thinking about Christianity, this religion thing. And I have another Bible story for you in my series called, "Surprising Love," in which Jesus astonished people yet again, including not only the onlookers – he was always shocking his enemies – but also his friends. His disciples spent half of the three years walking around behind Jesus with their jaws dropping because he was always turning their world upside down. They were in a mental place where religion was for only us Jews, we are the chosen and we are the saved. It's for adults and generally the women stepped to the back. The adult males were always amazed when Jesus had time for anybody else besides adult Jewish males.

You might remember a couple of weeks ago we looked at the astonishing story of how Jesus had surprising love for a Samaritan woman and the disciples came and were amazed that he was wasting time talking to her. Not only was she a female, which means she was second class, but she was also a Samaritan. One of the despised people. We're supposed to stay away from them. The Lord also had surprising love for an African, an Ethiopian. So he loved Samaritans, Ethiopians and last week he loved tax collectors, too. The scum of Jewish society had a place in Jesus' heart. And today, I want to put out to you what is actually a shocking concept – that Jesus is passionately in love with babies, too. Yes, babies. Seriously, babies, and I want to put out there how vital it is that they be connected to Jesus. And every one of those concepts is shocking, so let's let the word tell it to us. Would you like to open up your Bible with me to the gospel of St. Luke 18? And it's a tiny little paragraph you've probably heard before. In fact, I'm sure you have heard it before. But the problem with hearing something repeatedly is that it loses its shock value. Every sentence in here knocks you back on your heels if you really think about it. Let's take a look.

Jesus had been speaking to the grownups and afterward there was some quiet time and, "People were bringing even babies to Jesus to have him touch them." Wow. Babies. Why? Were they sick? Well, maybe. A touch from an apostle or from the Lord Jesus would heal. But even if they weren't sick in their bodies, these parents knew, "I need my child to be connected to this man because he's more than just a mortal human being. He's bringing something they need. He's a portal to God. He's a connector to God. He's a broker of forgiveness; we need what he's bringing. I want my child to be in his presence, if possible. I want my child to touch him. Just to get one touch. I may never see him again."

And when the disciples saw this they thought, “This is ridiculous. Those kids don’t need him. They’re not really sinning; they’re just kids. They’re babies, they don’t know anything. Nothing they do is planned or intentional. Their brains are like little blank chalkboards or whiteboards with nothing on them. And besides, they can’t understand any of the talk going on around them. Get them out of here! Not only do they not need any help, but they are not in any difficulties with God because they get a pass because they’re kids! Babies!” Babies look pure and innocent, don’t they? Haven’t you ever heard those terms, “Innocent as a baby?” You know, “Lose your childhood innocence.” We have this cultural myth that because children are cute and little that they’re pure and innocent and they only get corrupted later on. Like maybe around the age of twelve, doesn’t that sound about right sixth graders? By the age of twelve you’re supposed to start knowing what you’re doing. So this group of kids right here in the front of church, according to this way of looking at it, have just run out of childhood and are now waived into adult court. But up until now you’ve been getting a pass because you could say, “Hey, I’m a kid. You can’t pin that on me, I’m walking!” Flash your juvie card and you just walk out of adult court into juvie court and they slap your wrist a little bit and give you something easy like write a few sentences or whatever and then you can go back to your life. Your court records are sealed, nobody knows, the hearing’s private and you think kids should get a break because they have not achieved the age of accountability. That’s bogus! Don’t take our legal system and impose it on God. There is no juvie court in God’s world. Sin is sin. It is not merely the consciously chosen acts we do that bring us guilt, it’s being born this way, it’s congenital. Fetal alcohol babies never had a drink, they didn’t slug down any forty-ouncers. They’re born with it; they got it from their mother. You are a sinner not because you studied sin and made a conscious choice, “Yes, that’s the life for me. Yep.” You’re born corrupted and you need a rescue where you are, where every human being no matter what age needs forgiveness because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

What part of “all” do we have trouble getting? All have sinned. King David said in shame, “My problems with sin started not when I was looking at naked women from the top of my palace as they were taking baths on the rooftop bathtub below me. Surely,” he said, when he was lamenting in Psalm 51 his moral collapse, he said, “Surely I have been sinful from birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” My problems started at conception! I was sunk before I was even born. That’s when my problems began. Sin is a disease; it is a moral rot in our brains and hearts. And as we grow in knowledge, we’re able to add to it but sin doesn’t start at age twelve. You don’t become guilty in God’s eyes once you’re no longer a minor. We need rescue from the moment that we’re born and that’s why these parents got it and the disciples didn’t. They were bringing their babies to Jesus to get a touch. “Bring what you’ve got for them. I know they can’t understand your words yet, Jesus, but they can feel your touch. Have mercy on them, Lord. Forgive them. Love them with your surprising love and give us hope that they can live on and be forgiven with us.”

And Jesus saw the disciples shunting them off like they didn’t need it, like this was adult business. Religion and bible study is for grownups. Jesus is not needed until you’re twelve or older. They wanted to shunt those babies off to the side because they were annoying. Babies make noise and have bodily problems of self-control. They explode on both ends. Just stay away until you’re physically under control and have matured and can sit still and listen to an hour and a half long debate between the rabbis. We’ll talk to you when you’re older and when

you can choose it for yourself. For now, you're too little for this stuff and Jesus had harsh words for his disciples. Jesus now has a reaction to what his disciples said. This must have knocked them right onto their backsides! The disciples were rebuking these parents and their babies but Jesus called those little children, those babies, to him. Yeah, surprising love, babies, too! He called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them," and here's why: "The kingdom of God belongs even to such as these," even to these babies.

Now you've got to understand what, "kingdom of God," means. This is a spiritual use of a term that isn't exactly the same usage as if we were talking about maps and history. For instance, the King of France knew exactly the geography of his territory. The kingdom of Spain was something you could locate on a map. It had borders and you knew it was a place. The kingdom of God is not a place. Even heaven, for instance, is a part of the concept but heaven is not the kingdom of God. Those are different concepts. The kingdom of God is really about relationships. It is Christ's ruling activity in people's hearts. The kingdom of God essentially means wherever there are believers who now have a faith relationship with their Savior Jesus Christ. So when Jesus said, "These babies have a piece of the kingdom of God," he was saying, "They have a faith relationship with me and don't you dare push them away because I'm trying to draw them into a faith relationship with me."

And right there you're going to say, "Whoa. Faith relationship?" Perhaps you came to faith in Jesus Christ as an adult through the word of God. And that certainly is one of the powerful ways in which it happens. Perhaps you came to faith in Christ through a long process where you heard the word, digested it, and slowly over time it made more and more sense to you until you were convicted and you became a believer, a strong believer in him. That certainly is a way that it works but it's not the only way. Jesus said, "These babies, who clearly are not capable yet of rational processing of the messages of the word, have a faith relationship with me for they are in my kingdom. My ruling activity is in their hearts." And the disciples just could not handle that concept; they were just blown away by that. Jesus said, "Don't hinder them."

This concept comes through the old covenant times when the sacrifices and the bloody ritual of circumcision were done irrespective of those babies' ability to understand it. Those sacrifices and the circumcision brought them into a covenant relationship with God apart from the baby's interaction. And in new covenant times, the sacrament of baptism brings children, even little babies, into a covenant relationship with God. It's like an inheritance where the inheritee may have done nothing to earn the money, but Grandma or Great-Grandma bequeaths it to them and it is received as a gift. Baptism is one hundred percent God's gift to the individual and babies can receive that, too.

The book of Galatians says that when you're baptized you wear the holiness of Christ. "All who are baptized in Christ are clothed in Christ." Those are his clothes, not yours. And you can put Jesus' clothes even on a tiny little peanut. St. Paul wrote to Titus that, "We are cleansed by the washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit." He's the one doing the jumpstarting. And so, a ten year old, an eight year old, a six year old, a four year old, a two year old, a zero year old can be given an inheritance, given clothes that he or she did not earn or understand and still be the recipient of the amazing transformational work of God the Holy Spirit. And that touch, though we cannot have Jesus touch our babies today, he will speak to them through his word and

we don't even know how that wonder will happen. And we can splash the holy water upon them, the cleansing water that comes from Christ. And surprising love forgives babies, too.

It's not only baptism; it's the word, as well. You want another Scripture passage that if you think about it sets you back on your backside? St. Paul wrote to Timothy about when his Bible studies began. "You've known the Holy Scriptures, haven't you, Timothy?" From – who knows the amazing word? "From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures." Never limit what God can do. Never tell him his powerful tools have no power. Just let him work and if you can't understand it, that's okay. You don't need to understand it. Frankly, it's a miracle when grownups get converted too because the older you get, the more weapons you have to push God away and the more clever your arguments and dodges can get of pushing away the implications of your sin and the Savior's grace. But when those parents came to get what Jesus was bringing he said, "Let those children come to me. Do not hinder them. The kingdom of God belongs to such as these," because they are believers in me, too. I know you can't understand it, but I'm telling you how it is.

And then as if that weren't enough, he clobbers them with one last kind of rebuke. This is actually a stinger. Not only *can* children believe, but they are a model for how your faith must be or you're not coming into God's ruling activity or kingdom, either. "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like one of these babies will never enter it." Wow. Man! Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever pondered the implication of that outrageous statement? What that's saying is your relationship with God is not built by you. Even you as a grownup, your faith is a gift to you. The forgiveness was bought for you by Christ on the cross two millennia before you were even conceived. You were known by name and loved with your picture in God's heart long before you were ever born. In fact, before the world was created God imagined being in love with you. And so, this relationship is from him, all about him, initiated by him, carried out by him, made possible by him, fire of faith ignited in a heart by him. It's all God's doing and we just gratefully receive it. We say, "Thank you."

"Make disciples," Jesus said, "baptize and teach" and so that is our mission. And it needs to be your personal mission to advocate in your circle of influence these two simple, powerful concepts: Children, babies included, need Jesus Christ. They're not going to need him someday, they need him now. We don't know how many more tomorrows you have. Yes, children die, too. Second, there is hope, forgiveness, and a Jesus touch for them all and you can help make that happen. Every one of you who is a believer in Jesus Christ is already a trained, equipped, royal priest of God and you are all hereby authorized to carry out baptisms if the opportunity presents itself. And we pastors are here to help facilitate that and are happy to do them, but it is not a clergy prerogative that only we get to do those. You are all royal priests of God to carry out a rescue mission to the dying.

And finally, thank God for giving you what he gives to children so that your faith can be like a child's, just completely trusting him. The older my children get the less they trust me. Do you know that when my kids were like two I could put them up on one of their bunk beds and hold out my arms and say, "Jump," and they would just jump. We had a lot of fun just playing crazy games like that. But by the time they were eight, if I put them up on the bed and said jump they'd go, "What kind of trick is this? You're going to step back and let me fall, aren't you?"

This is a scam.” They start coming up with dodges and they trust me less and less because they have learned to be fearful. And what Jesus is praising is complete unquestioning openness of the heart; to believe in Christ like a child without arguing, just trusting. Just jump into believing his words. Surprising love, I love you.

One last little thing. Christian churches can be brutal to parents of young children. They don’t ever pass resolutions to be cruel, they just do it. Every parent in this room who’s ever brought a child to church knows “the look,” right? When somebody in front of you cranks around and glares at who’s the noisemaker three pews back, like “Get that kid out of here! They’re messing up the lecture. This is like college. We’re trying to pay attention to this speech, but the kid is making noise. What are you doing here?” Every parent who’s brought a small child has died a thousand deaths of embarrassment because the little ones make noises, generally not appropriate for quiet gatherings. They produce sensory stimulation that some people find offensive. They blurt things out of their mouths that make their parents die of embarrassment and sometimes, worshipping groups make it extremely uncomfortable for the kid experience so they stay away and the children grow up without learning ever how to enjoy worship. They don’t learn how to sing, they don’t learn how to pray and the parents just wait until later and they say, “Well, when my kid is in high school they can choose for themselves.” Or, “When they’re on their own, when they’re in college, they can choose,” and by then a child has become hardened in patterns of ignoring God.

All right, so what? Let’s bring this now down to your own life. Imagine that you are with those disciples. There are children in your life and you are able to send the same message to their families and to those children, that even babies God has surprising love for. You can help to transmit that message that we are not going to hinder you or keep you away from Jesus because God’s kingdom belongs to you and to your children, as well. We are going to send a message. If you are in part of a church worshipping community, sometimes families with children feel out of place because their children are noisy, or whatever, and they stay away. You can help send a message: Bring your kids for the kingdom of God belongs to them, as well. You can send a message that children are very important to the Lord Jesus and that even babies belong in his arms. You can help present the message that forgiveness of sins and life and salvation are truly global and universal for all, babies included.

I’ll be back to pray with you in just a moment.

Shall we pray together?

Lord Jesus, help me to see my life really in your context and especially to see how universal your grace and love and mercy are. They are for all people, little children included. Help me to have the same love for little ones that you have. Help me to proclaim your kingdom and do whatever I can not to hinder little children, even babies, but to bring them to you for your love. I pray in your name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I’m Pastor Mark Jeske, reminding you every day is a day of grace for you.



Grace Notes

Guides for Personal Bible Study

Surprising Love: Babies! Seriously!

Luke 18:15-17: People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, “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.”

Points to Ponder

- When you look at a newborn baby, it’s hard to imagine that something so sweet looking could be sinful. But what does the Bible clearly state about all people—including babies?
- Babies don’t understand what’s going on around them. How is it possible that they can have faith?
- Read Luke 18:17. What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God like a little child?
- Have you ever found yourself dismissing children as unimportant in the life of a church? Jesus tells us they too have a place. Can you think of ways for the children in your congregation to serve?

The Bottom Line

Jesus made it very clear that all people—including children—need the forgiveness he has to offer. By rebuking the disciples for sending children away, he was saying that children too have worth and a purpose in his kingdom. They too can have faith because it is the power of the Holy Spirit that works that faith, not an issue of understanding faith. In fact, childlike faith is what we ought to have in order to enter heaven. We can also show Jesus’ surprising love by teaching God’s Word to the children in our lives, encouraging them to participate in worship, and finding ways for them to serve others and express their faith.

You can dig deeper into your Bible by reading more about these truths from the lesson:

- **Forgiveness for All Ages** Acts 2:38; Romans 3:23,24; 2 Corinthians 5:15; 2 Peter 3:9
- **Babies believe!** Psalm 71:6; Psalm 139:13; Matthew 18:4; Matthew 18:10; 2 Timothy 3:15
- **Baptism Creates Faith!** Matthew 3:11; Acts 2:38; Colossians 2:12; Titus 3:5
- **God’s Kingdom Come!** Daniel 2:44; Matthew 6:33; Matthew 13:31-33; Luke 17:21; John 3:5