

Jesus and the Children

"And they brought young children to Him, that He should touch them: and His disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was much displeased and said to them, Suffer the little children to come to Me, and forbid them not: for of such is the Kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. And He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them and blessed them."

Mark 10:13-16.

IT must be a very great sin, indeed, to hinder anybody from coming to Christ. He is the only way of salvation from the wrath of God. He is salvation from the terrible judgment that is due to sin—who would dare to keep the perishing from that way? To alter the signposts on the way to the City of Refuge, or to dig a trench across the road, would have been an inhuman act, deserving the sternest condemnation. He who holds back a soul from Jesus is the servant of Satan and is doing the worst of all the devil's work! We are all agreed about this.

I wonder, my dear Friends, whether any of us are quite innocent in this respect? May we not have hindered others from repentance and faith? It is a sad suspicion, but I am afraid that many of us have done so.

Certainly, you who have never believed in Jesus yourselves have, sadly, done much to prevent others from believing. The power of example, whether for good or bad, is very powerful and especially is it so with parents towards their children, superiors towards their underlings, and teachers towards their pupils. Perhaps, Father, if you had been an earnest Christian, your son would not have been ungodly. Possibly, dear mother, if you had been decided for the Saviour, the girls would have been Christians, too. We have to speak and judge after the manner of men, but assuredly, example is a great fashioner of character. We can, none of us, tell if we go down to Hell, how many we shall draw with us, for we are bound to thousands by invisible bands. Here's the respect that makes a wide calamity out of the ruin of a single soul. Over the tomb of each sinner may be read this inscription, "This man perished not alone in his iniquity." "None of us lives to himself, and no man dies to himself."

If we could fling our souls away as solitary stones out of the sling, this were woe enough, but since we are all threaded beads upon the string of common life, where one goes, many go with him. The plague of sin will not confine itself to one man's house—it sallies forth from every door and window—and slays its victims all around so that "one sinner destroys much good." May I put this question to those of you who have never repented of your sins, nor sought the Saviour's face? Have you calculated what harmful influences are streaming from your lives upon the souls of your children, your wives, your brothers, your friends? Jesus says, "He that is not with Me, is against Me, and He that gathers not with Me, scatters abroad." How many have you scattered abroad like wandering sheep? How many have you induced to remain careless and godless since they see you doing the same? These are solemn reflections for those who mean no harm, yet are doing harm.

I am going to speak upon the great sin of hindering the young from coming to Christ. First, let us describe it. Secondly, let us watch its action. Thirdly, let us see how Jesus Christ condemns it. And then, lastly, let us take the hint which Jesus gives to those who would come to Him. It may be that the Lord will bless this to our souls.

I. LET US DESCRIBE THIS SIN of hindering young children from coming to Christ.

First, I can say that it is very common. It must be common, or else it would not have been found among the 12 Apostles. The immediate disciples of our Lord were a highly honourable band of men, despite their mistakes and shortcomings. They must have been greatly sweetened by living near to One so perfect and so full of love. I gather, therefore, that if these men, who were the cream of the cream, rebuked the mothers who brought their young children to Christ, it must be a pretty common offence in the Church of God. I fear that the chilling frost of this mistake is felt almost everywhere.

I am not going to make any ungenerous statement, but I think that if a little personal investigation were made, many of us might find ourselves guilty on this point and might be led to cry, like Pharaoh's butler, "I do remember my faults this day." Have we laid ourselves out for the conversion of children as much as we have done for the conversion of grown-up folks? What? Do you think me sarcastic? Do you not lay yourselves out for anybody's conversion? What must I say to you? It is dreadful that the spirit of Cain should enter a Believer's heart and make him say, "Am I my brother's keeper?" It is a shocking thing that we should, ourselves, eat the fat and drink the sweet—and leave the famishing multitudes to perish! But tell me, now, if you did care for the salvation of souls, would you not think it rather too commonplace a matter to begin with boys and girls? Yes—and your feeling is shared by many. The fault is common.

I believe, however, that this feeling, in the case of the Apostles, was caused by zeal for Jesus. These good men thought that the bringing of children to the Saviour would cause an interruption—He was engaged in much better work—He had been confounding the Pharisees, instructing the masses and healing the sick. Could it be right to pester Him with children? The little ones would not understand His teaching, and they did not need His miracles—why should they be brought in to disturb His great doings? Therefore, the disciples as good as said, "Take your children back, good women. Teach them the Law of God, yourselves, and instruct them in the Psalms and the Prophets and pray with them. Not every child can have Christ's hands laid on them. If we suffer one set of children to come, we shall have all the neighbourhood swarming about us, and the Saviour's work will be grievously interrupted. Do you not see this? Why do you act so thoughtlessly?"

The disciples had such reverence for their Master that they would send the prattlers away lest the great Rabbi should seem to become a mere teacher of babes! This may have been a zeal for God, but it was not according to knowledge! Thus, in these days, certain Brothers would hardly like to receive many children into the Church lest it should become a society of boys and girls. Surely, if these come into the Church in any great numbers, the Church may be spoken of in terms of reproach! The outside world will call it a mere Sunday school. I remember that when a fallen woman had been converted in one of our county towns, there was an objection among certain professors to her being received into the Church, and certain lewd fellows of the baser sort even went the length of advertising upon the walls the fact that the minister had baptised a harlot! I told my friend to regard it as an honour.

Even so, if any reproach us with receiving young children into the Church, we will wear the reproach as a badge of honour! Holy children cannot possibly do us any harm. God will give us the necessary age and experience to steer the Church prudently. We will receive none who fail to yield evidence of the new birth, however old they may be—and we will shut out no Believers, however young they may be! God forbid that we should condemn our cautious Brothers, but, at the same time, we wish

their caution would show itself where it is more required. The children will not dishonour Jesus—we have far more cause to fear the adults!

The Apostles' rebuke of the children arose, to some extent, from their ignorance of the children's needs. If any mother in that throng had said, "I must bring my child to the Master, for he is sorely afflicted with a devil," neither Peter, nor James, nor John would have demurred for a moment, but would have assisted in bringing the possessed child to the Saviour. Or suppose another mother had said, "My child has a pining sickness upon it. It is wasted on skin and bone. Permit me to bring my darling, that Jesus may lay His hands upon her"—the disciples would all have said—"Make way for this woman and her sorrowful burden." But these little ones with bright eyes, prattling tongues and leaping limbs—why should they come to Jesus?

Ah, Friends, they forgot that in those children, with all their joy, their health and their apparent innocence, there was a great and grievous need for the blessing of a Saviour's Grace! If you indulge in the novel idea that your children do not need conversion—that children born of Christian parents are somewhat superior to others and have good within them which only needs development—one great motive for your devout earnestness will be gone! Believe me, Brothers and Sisters, your children need the Spirit of God to give them new hearts and right spirits or else they will go astray as other children do! Remember that, however young they are, there is a stone within the youngest breast—and that stone must be taken away, or be the ruin of the child!

There is a tendency toward evil even before it has developed into an act, and this tendency needs to be overcome by the Divine Power of the Holy Spirit, causing the child to be born again! Oh, that the Church of God would cast off the old Jewish idea which still has such force around us, namely, that natural birth brings with it Covenant privileges! Now, even under the old dispensation, there were hints that the true Seed was not born after the flesh, but after the spirit, as in the case of Ishmael, Isaac, Esau, and Jacob. Will not even the Church of God know that, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit?" "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" The natural birth communicates Nature's filthiness, but it cannot convey Grace. Under the New Covenant, we are expressly told that the sons of God are "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Under the Old Covenant, which was typical, the birth according to the flesh yielded privilege, but to come at all under the Covenant of Grace, you must be born again! The first birth brings you nothing but an inheritance with the first Adam. You must be born again to come under the headship of the second Adam!

Brothers and Sisters, you must sorrowfully look upon your children as born in sin and shaped in iniquity, "heirs of wrath, even as others." And though you may, yourself, belong to a line of saints and trace your pedigree from minister to minister, all eminent in the Church of God, yet your children occupy precisely the same position by their birth as other people's children do, so that they must be redeemed from under the curse of the Law by the precious blood of Jesus and they must receive a new nature by the work of the Holy Spirit! They are favoured by being placed under godly training and under the hearing of the Gospel, but their need and their sinfulness are the same as in the rest of the race. If you think of this, you will see the reason why they should be brought to Jesus Christ—a reason why they should be brought as speedily as possible in the arms of your prayer and faith to Him who is able to renew them!

Also, it is no doubt that this feeling that children may not come to Christ may be derived from a doubt about their capacity to receive the blessing that Jesus is able to give. Upon this subject, if I were at this moment to deal with facts alone and not with mere opinion, I could spend the whole morning giving details of young children whom I have personally conversed with, some of them very

young children, indeed. I will say broadly that I have more confidence in the spiritual life of the children that I have received into this Church than I have in the spiritual condition of the adults thus received. I will even go further than that and say that I have usually found a clearer knowledge of the Gospel and a warmer love to Christ in the child converts than in the grown-up converts. I will even astonish you still more by saying that I have sometimes met with a deeper spiritual experience in children of 10 and 12 than I have in certain persons of 50 and sixty!

It is an old proverb that some children are born with beards. Some boys are little men, and some girls are little old women. You cannot measure the lives of any of us by our ages. I knew a boy who, when he was 15, often heard old Christian people say, "The boy is 60 years old—he speaks with such insight into Divine Truths of God." I believe that this youth at 15 did know far more of the things of God and of soul travail than any around him, whatever their age might be. I cannot tell you why, but I know that some are old when they are young, and some are very green when they are old. Some are wise when you would expect them to be otherwise, and others are very foolish when you might have expected that they had left their folly.

Oh, dear Friends, talk not of a child's incapacity for repentance! I have known a child weep herself to sleep by the month together under a crushing sense of sin. If you would know a deep, bitter and awful fear of the wrath of God, let me tell you what I felt as a boy. If you would know joy in the Lord, many a child has been as full of it as his little heart could hold. If you want to know what faith in Jesus is, you must not look to those who have been befuddled by the heretical jargon of the times, but to the dear children who have taken Jesus at His Word and believed in Him, loved Him and, therefore, know and are sure that they are saved! Capacity for believing lies more in the child than in the man! We grow less rather than more capable of faith—every year brings the unregenerate mind further away from God and makes it less capable of receiving the things of God! No ground is more prepared for the good Seed than that which, as yet, has not been trodden down as the highway, nor has been, as yet, overgrown with thorns! Not yet has the child learned the deceits of pride, the falsehoods of ambition, the delusions of worldliness, the tricks of trade, the sophistries of philosophy—and so far it has an advantage over the adult! In any case, the new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit, and He can as easily work upon youth as upon age.

Some, too, have hindered the children because they have been forgetful of the child's value. The soul's price does not depend upon its years. "Oh, it is only a child!" "Children are a nuisance." "Children are always getting in the way." This talk is common. God forgive those who despise the little ones! Will you be very angry if I say that a boy is more worth saving than a man? It is infinite mercy on God's part to save those who are seventy, for what good can they now do with the end of their lives? When we get to be 50 or 60, we are almost worn out, and if we have spent all our early days with the devil, what remains for God? But these dear boys and girls—there is something to be made out of them! If now they yield themselves to Christ, they may have a long, happy and holy day before them in which they may serve God with all their hearts! Who knows what Glory God may have of them? Heathen lands may call them blessed! Whole nations may be enlightened by them! If a famous schoolmaster was accustomed to take his hat off to his boys because he did not know whether one of them might not be Prime Minister, we may justly look with awe upon converted children, for we do not know how soon they may be among the angels, or how greatly their light may shine among men! Oh, Brothers and Sisters, let us estimate children at their true value, and we shall not keep them back, but we shall be eager to lead them to Jesus at once!

In proportion to our own spirituality of mind and in proportion to our own child-likeness of heart, we shall be at home with children, and we shall enter into their early fears and hopes, their budding

faith and opening love! Dwelling among young converts, we shall seem to be in a garden of flowers, in a vineyard where the tender grapes give a good smell!

II. Secondly, concerning this hindering of children, LET US WATCH ITS ACTION. I think the results of this sad feeling about children coming to the Saviour are first evident in the fact that often there is nothing in the service for the children. The sermon is over their heads, and the preacher does not think that this is any fault. In fact, he rather rejoices that it is so! Some time ago, a person who needed, I suppose, to make me feel my own insignificance, wrote to say that he had met with a number of Negroes who had read my sermons with evident pleasure. And he wrote that he believed they were very suitable for what he was pleased to call, "Niggers." Yes, my preaching was just the sort of stuff for "Niggers", he said. The gentleman did not dream what sincere pleasure he caused me, for if I am understood by poor people, by servant girls, by children, I am sure I can be understood by others! I am ambitious to preach to anyone, if, by these, you mean the lowest, the rag-tag and bob-tail. I think nothing greater than to win the hearts of the lowly! So with regard to children. People occasionally say of such a one, "He is only fit to teach children. He is no preacher." Sirs, I tell you that in God's sight, he is no preacher who does not care for the children! There should be at least a part of every sermon and service that will suit the little ones! It is an error which permits us to forget this.

Parents sin in the same way when they omit religion from the education of their children. Perhaps the thought is that their children cannot be converted while they are children, and so they think it of small consequence where they go to school in their tender years. But it is not so. Many parents even forget this when their girls and boys are closing their school days. They send them away to the Continent, to places foul with every moral and spiritual danger, with the idea that there they can complete an elegant education. In how many cases I have seen that education is completed, and it has created young men who are reckless spenders and young women who are simply flirts! As we sow, we reap. Let us expect our children to know the Lord! Let us, from the beginning, mingle the name of Jesus with their A B Cs. Let them read their first lessons from the Bible! It is a remarkable thing that there is no book from which children learn to read so quickly as from the New Testament—there is a charm about that book which draws forth the infant mind. But oh, dear Friends, let us never be guilty, as parents, of forgetting the religious training of our children, for if we do, we may be guilty of the blood of their souls!

Another result is that the conversion of children is not expected in many of our Churches and congregations. I mean that they do not expect the children to be converted as children. The theory is that if we can impress youthful minds with principles which may, in later years, prove useful to them, we have done a great deal. But to convert children as children, and to regard them as being as much Believers as their seniors, is regarded as absurd! To this supposed absurdity I cling with all my heart! I believe that of children is the Kingdom of God, both on earth and in Heaven! It is a sacred joy to me, on Thursday night, to notice certain boys and girls who have, for a long time, attended the pastor's Prayer Meeting with great regularity! Some of you old folks do not come and pray for your pastor, but these children do, for they love their pastor and he, on his part, highly values their prayers! Happy Church, which is adorned and blessed by the prayers of dear children who early learn to cry to the great Father for the hallowing of His name and the coming of His Kingdom! We expect to see children converted, and we do!

Another evil result is that the conversion of children is not believed in. Certain suspicious people always file their teeth a bit when they hear of a newly converted child—they will have a bite at him if they can. They very rightly insist upon it that these children should be carefully examined before they are admitted into the Church, but they are wrong in insisting that only in exceptional instances are

they to be received. We quite agree with them as to the care to be exercised, but it should be the same in all cases and neither more nor less in the cases of children. I thank God that most of those dear children who have been added to this Church could stand a rigid examination in doctrinal matters and would bear favourable comparison with the older folks! But still, it seems to me a very harsh thing that a high degree of knowledge should be expected of them.

How often do people expect to see in boys and girls the same solemnity of behaviour which is seen in older people! It would be a good thing for us all if we had never left off being boys and girls, but had added to all the excellencies of a child the virtues of a man. Surely it is not necessary to kill the child to make the saint! It is thought, by the more severe, that a converted child must become 10 years older in a minute. A very solemn person once called me from the playground after I had joined the Church and warned me of the impropriety of playing at trap, bat, and ball with the boys. He said, "How can you play like others if you are a child of God?" I answered that I was employed as an usher, and it was part of my duty to join in the amusements of the boys. My venerable critic thought that this altered the matter very materially, but it was clearly his view that a converted boy, as such, ought never to play! What foolery, Brothers and Sisters! I will say no more.

Do not others expect more perfect conduct from children than they themselves show? If a gracious child should lose his temper, or act wrongly in some trifling thing through forgetfulness, straightway he is condemned as a little hypocrite by those who are a long way from being perfect themselves! Jesus says, "Take heed that you despise not one of these little ones." Take heed that you say not an unkind word against your younger Brothers in Christ, your little Sisters in the Lord! Jesus sets such great store by His dear lambs that He carries them in His bosom—and I charge you who follow your Lord—show a like tenderness, in all things, to the little ones of the Divine family. I will not say more on that point.

III. And now let us notice, thirdly, how JESUS CONDEMNED THIS FAULT.

First, He condemned it as contrary to His own spirit. "They brought young children to Him, that He should touch them: and His disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was much displeased." He was not often displeased. Certainly, He was not often "much displeased," and when He was much displeased, we may be sure that the cause was serious. He was displeased at these children being pushed away from Him, for it was so contrary to His mind about them. The disciples did wrong to the mothers. They rebuked the parents for doing a motherly act—for doing, in fact, that which Jesus loved them to do. They brought their children to Jesus out of respect for Him. They valued a blessing from His hands more than gold. They expected that the benediction of God would go with the touch of the great Prophet. They may have hoped that a touch of Jesus' hand would make their children's lives bright and happy. Though there may have been a measure of weakness in the parents' thought, yet the Saviour could not judge harshly of that which arose out of reverence to His Person. He was, therefore, much displeased to think that those good women who meant Him honour should be roughly rejected.

There was also wrong done to the children. Sweet little ones! What had they done that they ought to be criticised for coming to Jesus? They had not meant to intrude. Dear things! They would have fallen at His feet in reverent love for the sweet-voiced Teacher who charmed not only men, but children, by His tender words! The little ones meant no harm, and why should they be blamed?

Besides, there was something wrong done to Himself. It might have made men think that Jesus was stiff, reserved, and self-exalted like the Rabbis. If they had thought that He could not condescend to children, they would have sadly slandered the repute of His great love. His heart was a great harbour

wherein many little ships might cast anchor. Jesus, the Child-Man, was never more at home than with children. The Holy Child Jesus was fond of children. Was He to be represented by His own disciples as shutting the door against children? It would do sad injury to His Character. Therefore, grieved at the triple evil which wounded the mothers, the children and Himself, He was sorely displeased. Anything we do to hinder a dear child from coming to Jesus greatly displeases our dear Lord. He cries to us, "Standoff. Let them alone. Let them come to Me and forbid them not." Dear grey-headed Friends, who are so strict and good, I must get you to stand back a bit and suffer that child to come to Jesus, for I do not wish the Lord to be displeased with you. And you, Good Christian Sisters, who have become a little hardened temper, I must beg you be quiet lest the Lord should be displeased with you, as He will be if you forbid the children to come to Him! So, you see, it was contrary to His spirit.

Next, it was contrary to His teaching, for He went on to say, "Whoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter in it." Christ's teaching was not that there is something in us to fit us for the Kingdom of God, and that a certain number of years may make us capable of receiving Grace. All His teaching went the other way, namely, that we are to be nothing and that the less we are and the weaker we are, the better, for the less we have of self, the more room there is for His Divine Grace! Do you think of coming to Jesus up the ladder of knowledge? Come down, Sir, you will meet Him at the foot! Do you think of reaching Jesus up the steep hill of experience! Come down, dear climber—He stands in the plain! "Oh, but when I am old, I shall then be prepared for Christ." Stay where you are, young man! Jesus meets you at the door of life—you were never more fit to meet Him than now. He asks nothing of you but that you will be nothing and that He may be All in All to you. That is His teaching—and to send back the child because it has not this or that is to oppose the blessed doctrine of the Grace of God!

Once more, it was quite contrary to Jesus Christ's practice. He made them see this, for "He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them and blessed them." All His life, there is nothing in Him like rejection and refusing. He says truly, "Him that comes to Me, I will in no wise cast out." If He did cast out any because they were too young, the text would be falsified at once—but that can never be! He is the Receiver of all who come to Him. It is written, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." All his life, He might be drawn as a Shepherd with a lamb in His bosom—never as a cruel shepherd setting his dogs upon the lambs and driving them and their mothers away! I have neither time nor strength to say more, and I must close with a mere glance at our last point.

IV. LET US TAKE THE HINT WHICH JESUS GIVES TO THOSE WHO WOULD COME TO HIM. "Whoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter in it." How I wish that all my congregation would come and receive Christ as a little child receives Him! The little child has no prejudices, no preconceived theories, nor opinions it cannot give up. It believes what Jesus says. You must come in the same way to learn of Christ. I fear you know a great deal—throw it out the window! You have made up your mind about a great many things—Surrender your mind and be as soft as wax before Jesus!

A little child believes with an unquestioning faith, which makes everything vivid and real. Believe just so! The child believes in all humility, looking up to its teacher and accepting its teacher's word as final. Believe in Jesus just so! Say, "Lord, I am a know-nothing. I come to You to be taught. I am nothing, be You my All in All."

A child, when it comes to Christ, comes very sincerely and with all its heart. It knows nothing of sinister motives or of formality. Its repentance and faith are genuine. I wish you would come to Christ this morning, you poor, guilty ones, in real earnest, just as you are. Do not play with religion any

more. Do not look for fine words with which to trim yourselves and make your prayers look neat and pretty, but come as a child does, in all simplicity, not ashamed to talk as your heart feels.

When a child believes in Jesus, it cares nothing for critical points. That is the way you must come to Christ. You who have always been inventing religious riddles—you who for many years have been readers of the latest novels in modern theology—for they are mere novels and nothing better! You who have muddled your brains with the pointless thoughts of pointless men, come to Jesus as you are and believe what Jesus says because Jesus says it! Take Christ at His Word and trust Him— that is the way to be saved!

"But I have no merit," said one, "I have no preparation." Neither has a child. I never find children troubled about being prepared for Christ. I have never heard of such a thing as a child worried about qualifications for Grace! A child is a sinner and knows it. That is the way to come to Christ. Come as a sinner, knowing that you are such! Say, "Jesus calls me, and I come; Jesus died for me and I trust Him." That is the true way to come to Jesus. O Friends, instead of thinking yourselves more fit for Christ by growing bigger, grow smaller! Instead of getting greater, get less! Instead of being wiser, be utterly devoid of all wisdom and come to Jesus for wisdom, righteousness, and all things!

Sometimes, when we are very feeble and our language is very simple, God may bless it all the more, and I do pray He may, this morning, set His seal upon this poor talk of His sick servant! Every particle of my flesh and every atom of my bones is praying God to bless this sermon! Grim pain has been racking me while I have been speaking. May this discourse be more honourable than its brethren because I bore it with sorrow! I long, I pine, I cry before God that He may bless this feeble word of mine to your conversion and to the conversion of many dear children. Those of you who have never looked to Christ and lived, do unto Christ, I pray you, just what these dear children did—He called them and they came and were folded in His arms. Come along with them! Do you half wish you could be a child again? You can be! He can give you a child's heart, and you can be in His Kingdom, newly born. May it be so, for His name's sake! Amen.