

Children: An Endangered Species

Luke 18:15-17

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If it's a dangerous time to be a child in the 21st century, it was exponentially more so during the days of Jesus. Many children never lived to adulthood, or even to their teenage years. Those who did survive infancy were marginalized in their culture. But Jesus changed all that. Through a simple act of showing interest and care in the lives of children, Jesus began a cause that, to this day, Christians all around the world continue to strive for: protecting and cherishing our children.

Not too long ago, someone in our church gave me a little hardback book, entitled *Children's Letters to God*.

It is page after page of children, from the ages of 6 to 8, simply writing out their questions or comments to the Lord with transparency, frankness, and often humor.

Like Alison, who wrote, "Dear God, I am reading the Bible and I want to know: what does begat mean? Nobody will tell me. Love, Alison."

Nan writes rather honestly, "Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love all the people in the whole world; there are only 4 people in my family, and I can't do it."

I like the bluntness of little Bruce who wrote, "Dear God, please send me a pony. I never asked you for anything before and you can look that up." Check your records, Lord.

Joyce is a little confused that her prayer request evidently got a little mixed up; she writes, "Dear God, thank you for my baby brother, but I prayed for a puppy."

What's going on in the mind of a 6-year-old? How deep does it go? Probably deeper than you might expect. Little Elliott writes, "Dear God, I think about you sometimes, even when I'm not praying."

Children's Letters to God, Compiled by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall (Workman Publishing, 1991)

Even when I'm not praying, there are times, Lord, when I'm thinking about You.

Would we expect God to be as interested in the thoughts of a 6-year-old as He is in the thoughts of a 26-year-old or 56-year-old?

Well, if you asked that question to the average rabbi living during the ministry of Jesus, the answer would have been, “No! God isn’t all that interested in what children are thinking.”

The Talmud—the central commentary for Jewish family and community life, a collection of guidelines which had been collected before the birth of Christ—dictated that keeping company with children was essentially a waste of time.

The prevailing perception in the first century was that God had more important things to do than care about children. Children didn’t register very high on the totem pole, so to speak, of public interest.

And that wasn’t just a problem within Judaism, that was the prevailing opinion in the Greek and Roman world as well.

Children didn’t matter. They were expendable. To be a child was, in many ways, to be an endangered species.

While our focus is on the context text of the first century, I could certainly make a case that even to this day, a child is still an endangered species.

An unborn child has less legal protection today than an unborn eagle. An endangered species of frog or snail or bird has more protective legal covering than the unborn child.

Adults determined to sexualize a child as early as possible, they now demand they choose their own gender. Adults are pushing hormone treatments and surgical procedures to transgender middle-schoolers; at a time when they need identity support, and encouragement, and love, they are now led into the confusion of an immoral, God-denying adult world where children now have to make decisions like that, when they’re still trying to figure out what tennis shoes they like better.

Instead of protecting their innocence, the adult world preps them, pressures them, and promotes for them promiscuity. It doesn’t tell them of emotional and mental effects—not to mention the physical effects—that every day now in America, 82 teenagers contract a sexually transmitted disease which will affect the rest of their lives.

So, I could spend time talking about children as an endangered species, so to speak, in the 21st century.

But if we travel back to the 1st century, yes: all the sexual issues were just as rampant and dangerous and legal.

But the greater problem added to that culture was simply the fact that children didn't live very long. In fact, people didn't live very long, especially mothers.

In the first century, a young girl was married soon after puberty and was expected to bear multiple children. While the life span of men was 40 years, the dangers of childbirth lowered a woman's to an average life span of 30 years.

Edwin M. Yamauchi & Marvin R. Wilson, *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical & Post-Biblical Antiquity* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), p. 280

During the days of Christ, 20 percent of women died during labor. One Greek author wrote that he would rather go to war three times than give birth once.

Ibid, p. 284

It was safer to go to war.

Keep in mind as well that only 40 percent of the population back in these days lived to the age of 20.

When you think of Jesus dying at the age of 33, even though He was in control of His death, keep in mind that in His day, everyone would have thought He'd lived a full life.

But for children, the odds of surviving were far worse.

It has been estimated by historians that in the Roman empire, 1/3rd of all babies died within their first year of life; only half of the children born would live to the age of five.

Ibid, p. 285

You might think that this was common only among the poor, but the wealthy and well-doctored were not immune.

Caesar's daughter Julia died in childbirth; Quintilian, a leading Roman author and educator, buried his wife after her 18th birthday, along with two of their sons who didn't live past the age of 5. Plutarch, the Greek philosopher wrote a letter to his wife that has been found in which he consoled her after the death of their two-year old daughter, trying to reassure her of reincarnation. They had already buried two sons.

During these days, one philosopher wrote, "When you kiss your child at bedtime, you should remind yourself that they might be gone the next morning."

Adapted from Yamauchi, p. 285

Imagine a world where half the children died before the age of five.

And that still didn't end the list of dangers for this endangered species.

Infanticide was legal and common. One author wrote, contraception was ineffective, abortion was dangerous, so infanticide and exposure were the primary means of getting rid of unwanted children. And there were, get this, no laws against these practices.

Ibid, p. 865

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle taught that families should not rear a child if it was born defective in some way—deformed or disabled or appeared sickly at birth.

And again, if half the babies born into this world are going to die, why take the time to raise one that apparently has problems?

The Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical Antiquity, published just a couple of years ago, wrote that it was the role of the midwife to make the first decision. She would place the newborn on the bed or on the ground and inspect it, and then make a decision—and I quote—to determine whether or not the baby was worth rearing.

Ibid, p. 286

Beyond her decision, the father and mother still would decide whether to keep the baby or expose it.

The common practice was to place the newborn in a basket and leave it either in some deserted place where animals would take it away, or in a public place where some childless couple might raise the child. In larger cities, there were predators on the lookout who would raise these children for slavery or prostitution.

Ibid, p. 868

A child was an endangered species.

But let me tell you, the gospel will make a difference. And to this day, wherever the gospel of Christ is preached and believed, the value of children rises. The blessing of children and the protection of children increases.

From the second century, a woman named Priscilla referred to their alumni—a term we use for students that are trained by someone other than their parents. The term “alumni” was originally coined by the church for children who had been abandoned by their parents, rescued by believers and raised by families in the church.

Adapted from Yamauchi, p. 873

It will be the early church that begins to act differently than its culture. The church and church leaders will start the first orphanages, the first public hospital systems, and the first educational systems for the public.

It will be the New Testament church that demonstrates what it means to care for the physical and emotional and intellectual and spiritual wellbeing of children.

“Jesus loves the little children” wasn’t just a chorus, it was a core value of the early church.

And where did it start? Who was it that set an example and began to set the record straight? Jesus!

In front of thousands of people, mostly Jewish, but including the Gentile world as well, Jesus did something dramatically different than His culture would have ever expected, especially from someone who claimed to be a King—because kings didn’t usually bother with insignificant subjects.

Let me show you what happened. This unusual event is recorded for us in **Luke’s Gospel—once again to chapter 18; we’re now at verse 15:**

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

Luke 18:15

Stop long enough for me to tell you that Matthew’s Gospel adds the fact that this event took place while Jesus was literally surrounded by a multitude of people, chapter 12 in Luke uses the same expression to indicate that it is literally thousands of people that have now massed around the Lord.

On this particular day, parents began bringing their babies to Him; we’re not told who started this baby parade. Luke uses the word *brephos* for infant, but in verse 16 he uses the word *paidia*—translated children—a word typically used for elementary aged children. Mark’s Gospel uses the word *paidia* for this event as well.

So, the fullest understanding from the gospel accounts is that from newborns to pre-teens, you’ve got this incredibly long line of parents winding their way to Jesus.

Luke uses the imperfect tense to tell us that they kept on bringing their infants; they kept on bringing their children.

R.C.H. Lenski, [The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel](#) (Augsburg Publishing, 1946), p. 906

They just kept on bringing them. The disciples were convinced it would never end. Maybe you’re a nursery volunteer and you’ve wondered the same thing!

You need to understand that this wasn’t some lineup to get the Lord’s autograph, wouldn’t it be nice if Jesus patted little Frankie on the head or said something sweet to little Susy.

No, this was a scene of urgency; half of these toddlers won't live to celebrate their 5th birthday.

Adapted from Dale Ralph Davis, Luke: The Year of the Lord's Favor (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 91

This is a lineup of moms and dads, many of them are holding babies that will die within the next year.

David E. Garland, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke (Zondervan, 2011), p. 728

This was a scene of desperation.

It was customary for an elder or a rabbi to place his hand on the head of a child and pronounce a blessing.

Charles R. Swindoll, Insights on Luke (Zondervan, 2012), p. 424

Most parents didn't bother. But Jesus isn't just an ordinary rabbi. They knew He'd raised that little girl who died; they knew He'd raised a young man who'd died and was being carried out to the graveyard when Jesus interrupted the funeral.

Jesus He evidently cares about children; I must get Jesus to touch my child.

Now verse 15, the latter part tells us:

And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."

Luke 18:15b-16

Matthew's Gospel informs us that Jesus laid His hands on them, one by one. Mark's Gospel adds that Jesus took them in His arms and blessed them.

Adapted from Lenski, p. 907

Now to us this seems natural, but to this world, it was unusual.

Because of the rate of infant mortality, parents held back emotionally from getting too close to their children. They tried to build something of a protective wall around their hearts; they didn't invest a lot of time or show much affection for their little ones—it would only make death that much more painful.

Adapted from Yamauchi, p. 280

But Jesus evidently doesn't think that holding back was the way to go. He's holding them, hugging them in His arms, talking to them, He's just having a time with these children here!

Thousands of people are watching Him—watching this stunning display of affection from the most spiritual leader they'd ever been around. And up until this moment, their leading rabbis had taught them that spending time with children was a waste of time.

Let me tell you, Jesus has just held up the train! He said it's baby dedication time. It's the children's hour—or more likely, the major portion of the day.

This was purposefully designed by the Lord to teach us all life-changing, culture-creating, gospel-demonstrating relationships with children.

Jesus rebukes His disciples for getting in the way, then He says ***in verse 17:***

“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

Luke 18:17

His culture—even His disciples—viewed children as an interruption, Jesus viewed them as an illustration.

This is how you get into the coming Kingdom.

Not by becoming a child or becoming childish, but by becoming childlike in utter and total helplessness:

- being carried from one place to another;
- being fed and clothed;
- being taught everything from how to walk to how to talk;
- being unable to merit anything:
 - a child can't brag about how many times he fasted or how much he tithed or how many good things he did in the community;
 - like a little beggar, a child offers his parents nothing and receives everything as gifts.

“Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling!”

Utter and total helplessness and utter and total dependence on Christ.

The Lord plants the seeds here in His actions that will eventually bear this unique fruit in cultures around the world as they follow and imitate what Jesus happens to think about children.

There are several reminders for us all, and warnings for us, just as Jesus revealed here in this stunning event.

First, don't underestimate the personal worth of children.

Jesus loves the little children. Watch Him here.

Have you ever thought about the fact that when Jesus held each baby; hugged each child; blessing them all:

- He knew each one of them by name?
- He knew their life span, their talents, and their struggles?
- He didn't say, "I'm only going to hold the children who lives past his 5th birthday"?
- Or, "I'm only going to hug the child that lives a good life"?

No, He demonstrated His love to them all.

And don't forget the fact that Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem here, in a matter of weeks, He'll die on a cross.

Adapted from William Barclay, [The Gospel of Luke](#) (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 226

There are certainly other things on His mind! The pressure He was under; the things He would suffer. He knew what was in store. But under that kind of burden and pressure and weight, Jesus takes time to demonstrate His care and love for these children.

After the Lord's ascension, as the disciples reflect on events leading up to the Lord's crucifixion, they're going to remember this investment of time. They're going to remember the value of children to Jesus.

And it will dramatically reverse the perspective of the believer toward children; it will launch a thousand ministries, that to this day, understand the personal worth of children.

Don't underestimate the personal worth of children.

Secondly: Don't overlook the daily pressure on parents.

As a church we want to be praying for and supporting the efforts of parents, we volunteer to teach them, watch them in the nursery, coach them on the soccer field, we bless children by blessing their parents in tangible ways.

But don't miss the fact here that in this scene from Luke 18, what the Lord is doing here was as much for the parents as it was the children, if not more so. How encouraging it

must have been for these moms and dads to see Jesus caring about their children. In a deeper way, this communicated that Jesus cared about them!

- Jesus was blessing them;
- Jesus was blessing the occupation of parenting;
- Jesus was placing His stamp of approval on their concern for their children;
- Jesus was entering in and ministering to them by giving His love and affection to their children.

Perhaps you can demonstrate the love of Christ for showing some concern for parents around you who are struggling to make it through another day.

I came across this story this past week; the wife of an army colonel had made an all-night flight to meet her husband who had been given his military assignment in Germany. She arrived at the Rhein-Main Air Base in Germany with her 9 children in tow, from age 15 down to the age of 2. She was absolutely worn out but somehow kept her the children corralled as they collected a dozen suitcases and bags; she did her best to keep them all in one section of the customs area. A young customs official watched them with an expression of disbelief. "Ma'am," he said, "do all these children and all this luggage belong to you?" She gave a big sigh and said, "Yes, sir, they're all mine." He collected himself and then began his official checklist, "Ma'am, I need to ask you, Do you have any weapons, or illegal drugs in your possession?" She looked at him and calmly said, "Sir, if I did, I would have used them by now?" They were allowed to pass through customs without having to open one suitcase.

Don't overlook the pressure parents are facing today in a million different ways. Pray for them; help teach their children when they arrive here on campus; volunteer to coach them; listen to their verses in AWANA; serve as a small group leader; write some parent a note of encouragement; or even surprise them by showing up to watch their children for a few hours, and pray you will survive.

Look, Jesus didn't preach a sermon on how much He loved children; He showed it by taking perhaps a good portion of this day to hold and bless and hug children one at a time.

Third: Don't discourage the spiritual decisions of children.

Yes, they might waffle and waver, but applaud and encourage their spiritual decisions.

- William Booth the founder of the Salvation Army was 15 when he was saved;
- Matthew Henry, the great Bible commentator was saved at the age of 11;

- Jonathan Edwards, the leader of the Great Awakening, was saved at the age of 7;
- Isaac Watts, the hymnwriter came to faith in Christ as a 9 year-old;
- Zinzendorf, who led the rise of Protestant missions, in the 1700s, was saved at the age of 4;
- Corrie ten Boom was 5;
- Stanley Jones, the famous missionary statesman through the early 1900s, decided to become a missionary as an 8-year-old boy. He saw a picture in church of a big tiger standing beside a little boy in India, and underneath was the caption, “Who will tell me about Jesus?” Stanley Jones said, “I decided then and there, I will tell him about Jesus.”

There’s no reason why children should be an endangered species; they should be enabled, encouraged, equipped for life, why? Because:

Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world;
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in His sight;
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

And so should we!

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