

Keep out of reach of grown ups

Luke 18:9-17

There's a lot of things in this world that come with the label 'keep out of reach of small children.' Things that would be dangerous for them since they don't know how to handle them. Things that are only appropriate for adults.

But the Kingdom of God - that is, life in the family where God is Father and head of the household, and all those adopted into the family through faith in Jesus share life together with Him - that's different. Life with God comes with the label: 'Keep out of reach of grown ups.'

Knowing God and putting your life in His hands isn't something you have to know how to handle before you immerse yourself in it. And it's definitely *not* only appropriate for adults. Not only is it safe for children, though. It's actually only available to those who take a leaf out of their book, Jesus tells us in Luke 18:17.

That's after we've been reminded since v.9 of how grown ups end up becoming judgemental, dishonest, hypocritical, self-justified, self-sufficient, comparison-led, procrastinating, work-focused, walls-up women and men. And none of those things fit with the Kingdom that Jesus brings to this world.

So this morning, we've got some things to learn from *young* children in particular, as Jesus explains in v.17. But first, Jesus tells a spot the difference parable, between two grown ups who try to approach God. v.9 says that He tells this parable 'to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.'

In vv.10-12, Jesus pictures a Pharisee - a respected religious leader - praying to God, basically to tell God how lucky God is to have a servant like him. The modern equivalent might be a longtime church attender with the wrong perspective. Or someone respected in the community for their life and work, who rests their identity on the reputation they've built.

There's at least three mistakes that the Pharisee makes in his approach to God, quite apart from the whole thing being about blowing his own trumpet as if the Almighty should give him a round of applause. First of all, there's the hypocrisy this Pharisee demonstrates. He prays, 'God, thank you that I'm not like other people - robbers, evildoers and adulterers...'

Jesus has already taught that the Pharisees are guilty of all these things that they pride themselves of being innocent of. He challenged them of robbing God and the poor in what they held back of the money they loved; He taught them that the practice they thought 'technically lawful' of divorcing their wives then marrying another was actually adulterous; and He castigated the burdens they loaded people with and the barriers they put up to people coming to God as evildoing.

So the Pharisee in this little story is praying a deluded prayer. He thinks He is innocent of things that God calls Him guilty of. He is a hypocrite, but he's too blind to see it. He's content in the comfort of his technical rule-keeping. Hypocrisy, whether you're conscious of it or not, has no place in life in the Kingdom of God.

Neither does the next thing the Pharisee demonstrates: Comparison. 'God, *I thank you that I am not like other men... that I'm not like this tax collector next to me...*' How many of us have thought to ourselves, 'I'm alright when you look at *them*'? It's remarkably easy to compare yourself to those around you - at work, at school, at church, in the family, on the street, in the news - and tell yourself, 'I'm better than that, so I'm probably okay.'

Comparison, of course, works the other way, too. 'I'm rubbish compared to them... I could never be as good a Christian, as good a *person* as them... *I'm not like this Pharisee next to me...*' Some people look around them, and conclude that, since they see someone else who's definitely a saint; they must not be. They write themselves off by comparing with what they think is above them, and saying, 'I'll never be what you want, God.'

But when did God ever say, 'Compare yourself with the person next to you'? Did He not rather say in His Word that every single one of us is created by Him, and every single one of us is flawed, broken and sinful? The gospel - the 'good news' - sets us free from this comparison stuff, which either blinds us to our lostness or blinds us to our hope. We'll look more fully at this in a sermon in January.

The third thing the Pharisee gets wrong in his approach to God is in v.12: Citing his CV of rituals and good works. 'I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' What does he suppose God's reaction is going to be? 'Oh my, that's very impressive, well done'? Or maybe, 'Okay, you're ticking the boxes as an acceptable human being to be in my company?' Or perhaps, 'I do love all my children, but I'm especially proud of *you*'?

But how many people live with some vague hope that the good deeds they do, or the regular rituals that seem quite worthy, are going to make them impressive or acceptable or worth being proud of? If you don't believe in God, who are you trying to impress, or be accepted by? If you do believe in God, what makes you think you've done enough? Or are you just resigned to a life of never knowing that you're certainly accepted?

What stage in our lives do we develop hypocrisy, comparison with others and basing identity in achievements?

(Development from *young children* - teenagers - adults. 'This is the way the world works' vs. 'This is the way the Kingdom of God works')

Jesus continues His parable by introducing His second character. A tax collector. You'll get the idea of how His audience would have reacted if you picture a sell-out traitor who everyone loved to hate. This tax collector approaches God quite differently.

He stands at a distance, because of his humility. He doesn't look confidently up to Heaven (which was the stance for prayer that people adopted there and then, quite different to ours!), but he beat his breast. It would be like breaking into tears and falling to your knees in public for us. And, in this broken-down, raw position where he really doesn't care how he looks anymore, the guy simply says to God, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

He tells God that he has got *nothing* to impress God with. That he has got no hope on his own record. That he's a guilty person - so what he needs is mercy. And the person he needs it from is God. That's all that he can say, and all that he does say. All the pretence and the fight and the keeping-up-appearances goes out the window. And there's something perfectly honest and exposed about this broken person in this moment.

There's no hypocrisy, because he is not trying to claim innocence, but rather confessing that he is guilty. There's no comparison with others. He's not thinking at all about stacking up well next to him but poorly next to her - because all he's thinking about is that before the *Holy God*, he's a sinner. And there's no appealing to his rituals or good deeds, because he doesn't have any. At least none he considers worthy of mentioning.

When a person believes in God, knows that they need God and His mercy, and *stops pointing to anything they've done as the basis for God accepting them* - that's when you'll recognise a true child of God.

And Jesus says as much in v.14. 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.' 'Justified' means 'declared legally innocent.' It is to be innocent, pure, worthy and welcome. And Jesus is talking about being '*justified before God!*' Considered as innocent, welcomed, accepted, knowing the Father's smile and the words, 'I'm proud of you!'

No, it's not for the Pharisee - Jesus says as much. And I suppose it's not for the very many people who don't give a stuff about whether they are 'justified in God's sight' - at least, not until they change their mind about that. How many people live their lives caring about being *justified* in their own eyes, or in the eyes of others, or both?

This 'justified in God's eyes' thing is for the humble. The one who stops pointing to anything in him that would make him acceptable, or anything in others that would make her more acceptable, and pleads for mercy from God.

Mercy that God says He is willing to show, if you will hear and believe this good news: Jesus died for the things you need God to be merciful about. So you can be confident that when you put your trust in that, God's mercy will be poured out on you. He is a parent who *wants* to forgive and restore you.

The end of v.14 reminds us that the Kingdom of God is a really upside down place. 'Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.' When Mary found out that she would give birth to the Son of God, she sang a song in Luke 2 about that kind of upside-down-ness that God would bring to the world.

We're singing a lot about the humility of *God* in our carols today. That God should humble Himself to become a frail, dependent baby born in poverty, destined to flee as a refugee, and later to experience homelessness. That God should for your sake and mine be exposed in the most raw and public way possible, stripped naked and fastened to two rough planks of wood.

Since the God we approach has been so humble before us, why should it surprise us that the raw, humble, unpretentious cries for mercy are what bring us welcome with this God?

What holds us back from letting down our walls before God and just crying out, 'I have got so much wrong God, please have mercy'?

(Too busy/scared to let walls down, don't believe in God, don't believe you've done anything wrong)

Finally, we've got three verses that remind us not only that 'children are people too,' but also that they are people that the rest of us have got a lot to learn from when it comes to the Kingdom of God. The disciples think that these babies being brought to Jesus and the little children running around Him are a distracting nuisance, keeping Jesus from the busy, important ministry He's got to press on with.

But Jesus says in vv.16-17, 'Don't stop these little children coming to me. Stop treating them like irritations. Come here children. Now, everyone else, look at these people and learn from them. Because the Kingdom of God belongs to people like these little children. If you don't learn how to receive what God's giving you like they do, you're not going to receive it.'

Jesus mentions the Kingdom of God twice in these verses. It's been a big theme throughout Luke's gospel. Summing it up - it's the community where God is King; the family where God is Father. That's the gift of belonging that comes with believing in Jesus. And Jesus tells us, 'receive it like little children do, or you won't receive it it all!'

So that got me asking - how *do* little children receive gifts that they are given? How's that different from grown ups? What can I learn from my kids here? What can we all learn from all little children?

Here's five ways that little children receive gifts that we need to learn from if we're going to be part of God's family too.

Little children receive things *inquisitively*. If you give a grown up something that they're not familiar with and don't understand, more often than not, we'll just politely say 'thank you' and then shove it in a cupboard never to be looked at again. If you give a little child something unfamiliar, they'll say, 'What is it, what is it? How does it work? Can you help me build it? Can we try it?'

There's a stereotype that 'accepting faith in Jesus like a child' means checking your brain at the door, asking no questions. That thinking results either in being a Christian who's too scared to be honest with their Heavenly Dad, or not being a Christian because you say, 'I'm more scientifically minded, personally' - which is still a comment that I hear from people who equate faith with 'asking no questions.'

Not only is that a really weary stereotype of what having faith in Jesus means, it's also incredibly insulting and patronising to the little children that Jesus tells us to learn from. Personally, I can't think of any group of people who ask *more* questions than little children!

So a faith that asks questions like 'what is this following Jesus thing? How does it work? How does it square with modern science and modern ethics and modern life?' *That* is participation in the Kingdom of God. Too many grown ups have politely thanked their Christian friends for sharing an invitation or a conversation and then shoved all that in some cupboard they'll never open. All because they weren't child-like enough.

Little children also receive things *trustingly*. It's true that child-like faith is trusting faith. Give a grown up a present, and if they're uncertain and suspicious of it, they might throw it out. But give a kid a present, and they might ask lots of questions about what it is and how it works, but there's no question that they'll take it!

Jesus offers us the Kingdom of God - life with God, now and forever, in His family. All through a gift of His death on the cross for our sin, and His resurrection power breaking death and sin for us. That's the gift held out. And although it's good to ask inquisitive questions as little children do, it's also good to trust that what God is holding out to you here is worth reaching out and taking.

Little kids *trust* that it's going to be better to take the gift that the loving parent holds out than it will be to refuse it. Grown ups don't - at least when it comes to God. The childlike amongst us will *believe* that life in Jesus is infinitely better than life apart from Him, and then ask questions to work it out. The grown ups will ask questions, or they won't. But when it comes to 'belief' (which is just trusting what God offers them), they'll reserve judgement on that for later (a 'later' that never comes.)

Little kids also receive gifts *desperately*. They can't *wait* to get their hands on the gift they're being offered! Hands outstretched, wide smiles, and 'when can I have it?' Grown ups, though... we've become rather good at not caring too much. Putting the gift aside to open later. Forgetting to pick it up. There's no urgency in our gift-receiving any more.

When Jesus says in v.16, 'Let the little children come to me,' you can imagine them running to Him as soon as they've been released from the grasp that

was holding them back. Contrast that with the 'maybe later, Jesus' that so many teenagers and adults I know express. 'Maybe when things settle... Maybe when I feel like I need it more... Maybe when it seems less of an interruption to the plans I've already made...'

Some people say, 'I know I'll become a Christian one day. Later. Not now, though.' That's a grown up thing. Grown ups think they can leave lovingly offered gifts for later. Little kids grab it when it's in front of them! As if, should they not get their hands on it now, the chance might disappear. Which of course, they're right about. Grab the gift of life with Jesus now! Like the little kids He's pointing at.

Little kids receive gifts *fully*. They take the whole thing, and make sure they've got the lot. If it's in a bag, they shake out the bag to make sure it's been emptied. If it's food, they make sure they're get as big a bit as they can. That's how to receive the Kingdom of God - taking hold of this life in God's family completely, making sure you're getting this 'life in all its fullness.'

Grown ups, though... grown ups treat life in God's Kingdom like a visit to a spa or a golf course. It's something you'll do every now and then, and you feel the benefit of it when you do. But you'll crack on without it for most of the time. There are lots of more profound reasons than that for why people find sharing life with church or even God quite difficult. But sometimes, when grown ups are honest, they reckon that God is good, but small portions of Him are quite enough. They think dipping in and out of life with Him will do.

Grown ups also do something else that little kids just won't. When they're offered something that will help them, they say, 'No, don't worry, I don't want to trouble you. I'll be fine.' Little children don't do that. They just grab what's being offered to them.

And those who copy them when it comes to the gifts God gives of life with Him know that we're really not putting God out by accepting His gift (but we really are when we don't). Life with God and His family is to be fully embraced, like a little child takes their gifts.

Finally, little children receive gifts *joyfully!* Give a grown up a gift, and they'll tend to remember to say thank you, but they'll often be a bit underwhelmed. Give a little child a gift, and they pretty often forget to say thank you, but they'll usually be really excited about what they've been given! Kids gasp with wide eyes at the sight of a tiny chocolate in a bowl. Grown ups close their eyes to eternal life on a plate.

The Kingdom of God - life with God, now and forever, with God as King of the Community, Father of the Family; where mercy, forgiveness and love flow with the wine; where hurts get healed and justice is restored; where people are made new and the toxic presence of sin gets rooted out; where life lasts for not just decades but for eternity - all of that is really *exciting*! When did grown ups forget to be excited about the Kingdom of God?

'I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.'