

# Undeserving, Yet Acceptable

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

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## Mark 10:13-16 (GNT)

<sup>13</sup> Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples scolded the people.

<sup>14</sup> When Jesus noticed this, he was angry and said to his disciples, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>15</sup> I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." <sup>16</sup> Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them.

Imagine you're a restaurant hostess. A family with four children comes through the door. What's your reaction?

Sam Rainer knows what to expect. He and his wife have four children. He's fully aware that the restaurant personnel know that they're going to have their hands full. Here's how Sam describes the experience. He says:

There are two kinds of restaurants—those that embrace children and those that tolerate children. You know this reality if you're a parent, especially if you have multiple small children. When my family of six storms a restaurant, I can tell immediately whether the establishment will embrace my children or tolerate them.

In a recent occurrence, the host looked at my brood with eyes wide: "Oh, my. You have . . . a lot of kids." I was not offended. Serving large families at a restaurant is tough. Odds are at least one of my kids will have a meltdown before the food arrives, and a 100% probability exists that large portions of *something* will fall to the floor.

Rarely are we treated rudely, but I can tell which restaurants merely tolerate my children. I understand the tension. Feeding my kids is hard work. It's why we pay money to have someone else do it! My wife and I don't get angry; we just don't return to the places where my kids are a burden. When we discover a restaurant that embraces children, we go back.

By the way, Sam Rainer is a pastor. So with pastoral awareness he sees a parallel between restaurants and churches. He writes:

There are two kinds of churches — those that embrace children and those that tolerate children. Most churches are not rude towards kids, and I've never seen a church sign stating, "No Kids Allowed." However, the families visiting your church will know whether you embrace their kids or not. The churches that welcome children have a higher likelihood of families returning — not just once but often!

[Rainer continues his thought:] Embracing children means understanding that messy is healthy. Children do not learn to eat cleanly.

They turn dining room tables into abstract impressionist works. More food ends up in the hair than in the mouth. You'll need a hazmat suit to serve spaghetti.

Children learning to take in God's Word, [learning what it is to] worship, and [learning to] love Jesus are just as messy. The dirt line on church walls about two feet high is there because little hands are dragging as kids walk the halls. Messy is healthy.

[Here's how Rainer concludes his essay.] Embracing children means valuing noise over perfection. Children make noises in worship. Children make noises in classes. Children make noises in the parking lot. They cry. They laugh loud. They scream and yell. Some churches *tolerate* the noise. Other churches *value* the noise....<sup>1</sup>

You have to wonder, was *that* what the disciples were worried about in today's gospel episode? People were bringing their children to Jesus in hopes that he would bless them with words or a kindly or even a healing touch. *Children?!? Interrupting the Teacher's schedule?!?* Is that why the disciples assumed full bodyguard mode, scolded the public and started to push them away from the traveling teacher? Just because of the swarm of shy-chattering, giggling-crying, eager-reluctant, jumping-hiding, frozen-in-place, squirming children?

Jesus spoke to his well-intentioned followers: "Don't stop them; let them come here!" We can imagine him reaching out his hands with a gesture of welcome to the eager children, and patiently awaiting the careful approach of the cautious ones. Jesus wasn't concerned with their runny noses, their dirty hands, their eager crowding. Though children aren't mentioned too much in the stories of Jesus, he made sure they took center stage here. Obviously Jesus was one who appreciated children for what they were: eager, innocent, inquisitive, totally dependent, trusting.

That's one clear message from this short Bible story:

♪ *Jesus loves the little children*

♪ *all the children of the world....*

But this story presents an additional message if you know a little more about the role of children in the cultural setting of the New Testament. You see, in our day and age we view childhood as a precious, cute, even magical time of discovery and delight. But "childhood in antiquity was a time of terror" because famine, war, and disease produced high mortality rates for infants, children and youth – indeed, "sixty percent were gone by age sixteen."<sup>2</sup> For that matter, average adult life expectancy didn't even reach what we today would think of as middle-age. "...In some areas or eras few [children] would have lived to adulthood with both parents alive." Childhood in ancient times was quite a different experience from the way we view it today.

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<sup>1</sup> An article "Be the church that embraces children, not just tolerates them" by Sam Rainer, Op-ed Contributor | Wednesday, July 27, 2022 based on his book [The Church Revitalization Checklist: A Hopeful and Practical Guide for Leading Your Congregation to a Brighter Tomorrow](#). Tyndale House Publishers, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, [Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels](#). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 238

It's not that children weren't loved and valued back then. "In addition to assuring the continuation of the family [line], they promised security and protection for parents in their old age." But "Children had little status with the community or family. A minor child was on a par with a slave...."<sup>3</sup> Until they attained adulthood – if they survived to adulthood – children were loved by family but held in low regard by society. In that agrarian society they didn't earn their keep. They were consumers, not producers. They were a burden. They were dependent on others.

...And yet Jesus told his followers to let the children come without hindrance. Why? "...Because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these," Jesus said.<sup>4</sup> "...*Belongs to such as these....*" What did Jesus mean by "to such as these?" That only people as innocent as children are deserving of God's love? No. Jesus meant that the blessings of God's grace are given to all who are open to receive them.

God's blessings are not a reward bestowed on the worthy but rather gracious gifts given to those eager to receive. For people of every age, people in every nation, people from every walk of life, people of every condition, God's promises of mercy and love and acceptance and forgiveness are for you.

God is more generous than anything we can imagine, welcoming you into the comfort and protection of God's realm regardless of whether your life has been characterized by purity and innocence or scarred by mistreatment or selfishness. God's gracious gifts of lovingkindness and forgiveness and providence toward us are as undeserved but as welcomed as loving care given to children "in their helplessness or defencelessness [*sic*], without any claim on their part that they have deserved or earned it."<sup>5</sup>

"...Children are unselfconscious, receptive, and content to be dependent upon others' care and bounty; it is in such a spirit that the kingdom must be received—it is a gift of God and not an achievement on the part of [humankind]; it must be simply accepted, inasmuch as it can never be deserved."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus calls for you to come to him. Don't let anything or anyone hinder you from embracing the gifts of God presented to us in Jesus the Son.

- Don't be hindered by any regrets that haunt you.
- Don't be hindered by having been told that you'll never amount to much.
- Don't be hindered simply because your self-image has been bruised by mistreatment or neglect or abuse.

Jesus himself has announced that the kingdom of God is meant for such as these—for such as you and me.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 238

<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:14 Good News Translation

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Anderson, The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Mark. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1981, p. 246

<sup>6</sup> D.E. Nineham. St. Mark. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963, p. 268, citing A.E.J. Rawlinson's Westminster Commentary