

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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TO SUCH BELONGS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Matthew 19:13-15

People often crowded around Jesus for a touch of His hand and His blessing. In Matthew 19:13-15, we see parents bringing their children to Him with the hope that He would lay His hands on them. Let's look at this passage.

Matthew 19:13. Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people;

14 but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

15 And he laid his hands on them and went away.

The kingdom is for the helpless

In a previous lesson entitled 'Unless you become like children' (Matthew 18:1-4), we saw the Lord Jesus stressing the fact that we must become as children if we are to enter the kingdom of God. He said in v. 3, *Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.* Here in Matthew 19:14, Jesus repeats the same point but in a different wording. He uses the phrase 'for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' *Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.* The kingdom of heaven is for people such as these children.

This teaching seems plain enough until we begin to ask a number of questions. For example, who are the children who will be saved? What kind of children is Jesus talking about? How old are they? There is a big difference between a one-year-old child and a ten-year-old child.

On this matter of age, more information is given by the parallel passages. We may assume from Mark that these children were very young since he tells us in Mark 10:16 that Jesus *took them in His arms.* Luke is even more specific. He uses the word 'infant' in Luke 18:17.

Luke 18:15. Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

Luke tells us that people were bringing their infants, their babes as we read in certain translations. The Greek word for 'infant', *brephos*, is used even of an unborn child as in the case of Elizabeth who said, *'The baby (brephos) leaped in my womb for joy,'* when she heard the voice of Mary (Luke 1:44). The apostle Peter compares Christians to babes who hunger for milk. *Like newborn*

babes (brephos), long for the pure spiritual milk (1Peter 2:2)... So the word 'infant' refers to a very young child.

If we are primarily talking about infants in Matthew 19:13, then we get some idea of what it means to become as children. When we look at an infant, the first characteristic that we observe is that he is entirely helpless. He is basically incapable of doing anything for himself. He depends totally on his parents for everything.

This is in line with the Lord's basic teaching on salvation. Remember how He begins the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are who? Blessed are the poor. Why? For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The children have the kingdom. The poor have the kingdom. You see the parallel? The one thing that the children and the poor have in common is that they are both powerless and helpless.

We can see here a very clear principle in the Lord's teaching: it is the helpless, the weak, who are going to inherit the kingdom. The kingdom of God is for those who recognize that they are as helpless as a babe or a poor. It is for those who recognize that they depend entirely on God's grace for their eternal well-being.

To such

Once we have explained this point, we need to address another question. This one is more problematic. I bring you back to the sentence in Matthew 19:14. 'Do not stop the children, the infants, from coming to Me.' *For to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.* 'For to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' The kingdom is for such people. The word 'such' means childlike people, as we have just shown. The question is whether it also means children. Because if we say that it also includes literal children, then we have a problem. Does it mean that all children, irrespective of whether they have faith or not, are saved? Do we not all have a sinful nature from the day we are born, deserving nothing but the wrath of God? You can immediately see that the implications of a statement like this are very serious.

It is my belief that the word 'such' refers not only to childlike people, but it includes literal children as well. You know, we often hear this question from Christians: 'What happens to all those children who die in infancy? Do they go to hell?' My answer is this. 'To such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' The kingdom of heaven is composed of such children literally, and of those who are spiritually in the position of children. Parents who have lost little children do not have to worry for them. They are part of God's kingdom.

Some might object strongly to this opinion. 'Jesus does not really mean that children are admitted to the kingdom of heaven,' they say, 'but only adults who become like children.'

Well, is the word 'such' limited only to people who spiritually become children and excludes literal children? Let's examine the matter.

The first problem with this view is that it is hard to defend logically. With Matthew 19:14, we have to take the reasoning like this. Children are admitted to the kingdom. Therefore, to be admitted to the kingdom, you must become like children. This is logically very easy to follow. Children are admitted to the kingdom. In order to be admitted to the kingdom, you must become as a child.

But the reasoning becomes unintelligible if we put it like this. Children are not really admitted to the kingdom. However you may be admitted to the kingdom if you become like children. The logic of the statement is lost in this kind of reasoning.

The Lord's words only have meaning if He is saying, 'Children enter into the kingdom. Therefore to enter the kingdom, you must become like children.' It is very difficult to make sense of

Jesus' teaching if He is saying, 'Children are not admitted to the kingdom. Yet, in order for you to be admitted, you must become like them.'

But we don't want to argue just on the basis of logic. We also want to give an exegetical argument. The Greek word for 'such' is *toioutos*. It occurs 61x in the NT. If you check them all, you will notice that there is no instance of the use of the word *toioutos* in which the example is excluded from the statement. In other words, you cannot say that someone like this child, but not actually this child, can be accepted to the kingdom. The child is only a picture of a spiritual reality. This child, himself, is not admitted. I do not see one single case of the word *toioutos* being used in this kind of way.

Let me illustrate this point with a couple of examples. In Mark 9:37, Jesus took a child in His arms and said, *Whoever receives one such (toioutos) child in my name receives Me*. If we receive a child (any child, including the one in Jesus' arms), we receive Jesus. The expression 'one such child' refers to the child Jesus was holding and to any other child like him. We cannot say that the word 'such' excludes the example.

In 1 Corinthians 16:15-16, Paul writes, Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia ... I urge you to be subject to **such** (*toioutos*) men and to every fellow worker and laborer. Submit yourselves to such people, namely Stephanas and his household and to people like them. You see that it includes the example, Stephanas.

So when Jesus says, *To such belongs the kingdom of heaven*, He means that the heavenly kingdom is composed of literal children and of people who are spiritually like children. The children are part of it.

Original sin but not original guilt

Now, I am well aware that this view goes against what is called the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine of original sin, as you know, explains that the sin of Adam affects us in two ways: (1) every human being has a sinful nature; (2) every human being is counted guilty by God. So because of Adam's sin, all humanity is tainted with sin and all humanity is guilty. Thus all must bear punishment. If you ask these people what happens to children who die at an early age, they will generally say that we don't know. They will tell you that we must leave the matter in the hands of God and trust Him to be just and merciful. But if we follow the logic of this doctrine, it seems to me that we have to conclude that infants are condemned to go to hell.

Adam is unquestionably held by the Bible for the origin of sin. Paul writes in Romans 5:12 that 'sin came into the world through one man,' namely Adam. Because of Adam's transgression, the tendency to sin in humans has been transmitted from one generation to the next. Inherited guilt, however, is another matter. I must say that there is no consensus on this point of Augustine's doctrine, which makes all human beings guilty because of Adam's sin. I am of the school of thought that believes that we do not inherit the guilt of Adam. In my understanding of the matter, every man is guilty for the sin that he himself commits.

Ezekiel 18 makes it very clear that the guilt of the fathers is not charged against their children. Let's take a look at this passage. The prophet Ezekiel starts by writing in Ezekiel 18:4, *Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: **the soul that sins shall die***. Notice the last sentence. *The soul that sins shall die*.

He then gives an illustration of a righteous man who faithfully keeps God's law. *If he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully-- he is righteous and will surely live," declares the Lord God* (Ezekiel 18:9). That man has a son who is violent and who sheds blood. *Will he live? He*

will not live! He has committed all these abominations, he will surely be put to death; his blood will be on his own head (Ezekiel 18:13).

On the other hand, if a wicked man has a son who sees all his father's sins but does not follow in his footsteps (Ezekiel 18:14), *he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. As for his father ... he shall die for his iniquity* (Ezekiel 18:17-18).

Ezekiel repeats the same message in v. 20. *The soul who sins is the one who will die. **The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son.** The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him* (Ezekiel 18:20).

We see that guilt is charged against the sinner only on account of his own personal transgressions, not because of his father's sins. Not because of Adam's sin. We may suffer the consequences of someone's actions. But this is different than being guilty of those actions. If you have a father who is addicted to gambling, you may not have enough to eat because he is losing all his money. The consequences of his actions affect you but they don't make you guilty of his wrongdoings.

It is very important to keep this distinction in mind when we read a verse like 1 Corinthians 15:22. There Paul writes, *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive*. In Adam all die. That is the consequence of sin. Death came into the world as a consequence of the sin of one man, Adam. It is not the same as to say that we are all guilty because Adam sinned. Notice that Paul does not say, 'In Adam all died.' The verb is a present tense. In Adam, all die. Everyone perishes. Each person dies as he becomes estranged from God by his own personal disobedience. In the same way, in the future tense all will be made alive in Christ as each one identifies with Him in an act of faith.

Sin is not imputed to infants

But what about the children who die before they are old enough to exercise faith? How can I say that they are not condemned? Do they not sin? Yes, they do. Human sinfulness manifests itself very early in life. But then, how can they be saved if they don't have the capacity to understand and believe the gospel? That is a very good question.

Here we have to understand the relationship of sin to the law. Paul says that the law was given to increase the visibility of sin for human beings. It is the means by which sin is highlighted as sin. *Through the law we become conscious of sin*, Paul writes in Romans 3:20. He also tells us that sin was in the world before the law came. However sin is not counted as such where there is no law. *For until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law* (Rom 5:13). If there is no law to be broken, sin cannot be put to the account of anyone. Furthermore, Paul asserts in Romans 7:8 *that apart from the law sin is dead*. It does not mean that sin is nonexistent. 'Sin is dead' in the sense that it is dormant or inactive. Until a person becomes aware of the law, sin is dormant in that person's life. That is why Paul says in the following verse, *And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died* (Romans 7:9).

This is a verse that is worth examining for a moment. One question we need to ask is, When did Paul ever live without the law? You see, Paul was brought up under the law from the day of his birth. In Philippians 3:5, he refers to himself as *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee*. Yet, he says in Romans 7:9 that he once lived apart from the law. But when the law came, sin became alive, and he died.

The only way to understand what Paul is saying, I think, is this. As a child, he did not live under the law because he could not comprehend the law. He was not at the age of reason. Every Jewish boy, at the age of thirteen, becomes a *bar mitzvah*, a 'son of the law.' That's what *bar mitzvah* means, a son of the law. Before the age of thirteen, you are not under the law. You are considered

exempt from the law. But when you become a *bar mitzvah*, having reached the age of reason, and being able to understand the law, you become morally responsible for your own actions. The law now rests upon your shoulders.

This is what Paul means. Before the law came into his life, before the age of *bar mitzvah*, he was without the law. He was not answerable to the law. Therefore he lived. He was alive. But when the law came, when he became a *bar mitzvah*, he died. And he explains why. His whole nature began to rebel against the law. Sin became alive.

Children are born innocent, that is, they are born guiltless. As they approach adolescence, they are increasingly able to handle abstract ideas and they eventually understand the concepts of sin and guilt. Sin becomes deadly in a human being when that person develops an awareness of the law and subsequently of guilt for breaking the law. It is the awareness of guilt that causes sin to kill spiritually. Remember Romans 5:13. Sin is not imputed when there is no law. Penalty for sin can be charged against a person only upon awareness of the law. When that awareness occurs, sin revives and guilt for transgression is then imputed, causing spiritual death. Those who do not reach that point of awareness are in a state of imputed innocence.

Therefore we should not fear for the salvation of infants or of those who are born and grow up mentally incapacitated. Because they do not have an awareness of accountability as lawbreakers, guilt is not imputed to them and should they die in that state, it is my belief that they will go to be with Jesus. 'For to such, to these infants, belongs the kingdom of God.'