

Matthew 19B

- I'm happy to say we land on a more pleasant topic today in our study of the Gospel of Matthew
 - Our study last week at the beginning of Chapter 19 required we deal with the difficult matter of divorce
 - But this week the topic changes back to the Kingdom of God
 - We study two moments in the course of Jesus' ministry that gave opportunity for a lesson on entering the Kingdom
 - The first of those comes today, and it centers on understanding the place of children in the Kingdom Program
 - We return to the moment of Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees about divorce, and what follows immediately after

Matt. 19:13 Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them.

Matt. 19:14 But Jesus said, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

Matt. 19:15 After laying His hands on them, He departed from there.

- As Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees, someone brings a child before Jesus asking that Jesus would lay hands on the child
 - We know Jesus is in Perea, and earlier Matthew said He was followed by crowds and was healing people
 - So it's likely that mothers of small children who were in need of healing were carrying their children through the crowds to Jesus
 - And at some point, a woman must have thrust her child into Jesus' lap while He was speaking on divorce
 - And as this happens, the disciples rebuked the women for interrupting the proceedings and bothering Jesus with something so trivial
 - Because in that time of history and in this culture especially, men stood above women and children

- Men made all decisions, owned all property, ruled over homes and nations, judged all matters and possessed all authority
- While women and children took a backseat in all these affairs
- And children occupied an especially low station in the societal pecking order
 - Parents loved their children no different than we do today, but they saw a child's place in the home and in society differently
 - Infant mortality was high and deadly diseases struck often
 - That reality led to a perspective that children weren't to be given much consideration until they reached adulthood
 - So until they reached adulthood, children were treated more like servants in the home than family
- Which means children had no prominence or privilege in the home or in gatherings of any kind, and in fact they were typically ignored
 - A child was never the center of adult attention, and adults never deferred to the needs of children in public life
 - You remember Mary and Joseph misplaced Jesus on their return from Jerusalem and had to return to find Him in the temple
 - How could that happen? Because parents didn't give children the same degree of attention or concern as we do today
- Furthermore, in Judaism, children were not seen as candidates for religious conversion or even having need of God's mercy
 - First, all Jews were thought to be included in the Kingdom from birth, so of course in Jewish thinking there was no need to convert a child
 - Secondly, a child had no place in Jewish religious life until he or she reached adulthood – aside from token roles
 - Not until a boy had his bar mitzvah at age 13 or a girl had her bat mitzvah at 12 did a child participate in Jewish religious life
 - But what about a child's sins? Rabbinical teaching held that the sins of the child didn't rest on the child himself but instead rested on the father
 - But at the bar mitzvah, the son became accountable to God for his own sin

- The boy's father would say prayers at the bar mitzvah thanking God that his son's sins no longer rested on his shoulders
- After that point, the boy or girl was required to participate in fasting on Yom Kippur and participate in other adult rituals
- That was the culture of these men, so children never factored into their expectations for serving the Kingdom Program
- So when mothers began interrupting Jesus for the needs of children during this important exchange on divorce, the disciples reacted in a predictable way
 - The disciples tried to stop this breech of etiquette with a rebuke
 - A rebuke refers to a strong word against someone, so you should imagine a stern, swift, even rude response on the disciples' part
 - As they try to stop the women from coming with their children, Jesus, in turn, rebukes His disciples
 - He says let the children alone, or in literal Greek permit the children
 - Before you assume that Jesus was striking a blow against cultural norms concerning women or children, look at the full context
 - Jesus is taking opportunity in this moment to teach His disciples about important Kingdom Program principles
 - We know this because Jesus immediately follows His rebuke by saying the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these
 - Which tells us that Jesus was thinking of spiritual matters in this moment, not earthly or cultural matters
 - So then the question becomes what spiritual lesson was Jesus trying to teach His disciples through that encounter?
 - First, let's remember that the Kingdom of God is Jesus' term for Heaven or being saved as we say today
 - More specifically, it refers now to the Kingdom Program, when Christ works through the Church to recruit Kingdom citizens
 - And the Kingdom Program leads us into the Kingdom proper which will begin on earth at the Second Coming of Jesus
- So Jesus is teaching His disciples a principle or truth concerning the Kingdom Program and the Kingdom that follows

- And the key to understanding what Jesus is saying is found in His phrase "such as these"
 - In other words, Jesus was saying the Kingdom Program is about reaching people who are like these children, including children
 - Jesus wanted to reach people the disciples hadn't given enough thought to reaching
- So in that sense, Jesus uses children as a metaphor for people that society doesn't value, never sees or hears, and views as unimportant
 - People like children, who are without advocates, without rights and privilege and yet are not beyond God's reach
 - The poor, the outcast, the persecuted – eventually even Gentiles, a group these men never imagined were included in the plan
- Serving those groups is not just part of the Kingdom Program...that mission lies at the heart of the Kingdom Program
 - And James tells us that it is the ultimate expression of our faith to seek out and serve those who are without power or privilege

James 1:27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

- James says when we direct our religious service toward people who are at the bottom of the scale (widows, orphans), we practice *true* religion
 - What makes it truer religion than serving the rich and powerful in the world?
 - Because we're serving people who cannot offer us anything in return for our service which means we do it with pure motives
 - And pure motives is the key to good ministry
- You know that the poor won't make a donation to your ministry in response to your service, yet you serve them anyway
 - The widow won't introduce you to her high society friends or invite you to play golf with her at the private club
 - Nevertheless, if you devote yourself to serving people like that, you're truly doing the work of your Father, not your own desires

- And that was the problem James was facing...a fleshly church doing what they did for the wrong reasons
- So as these women and children were being shooed away by the disciples, Jesus corrects them saying these are the type of people you must serve
 - These are the kind of people Jesus wants to draw to Himself, and when they come to the Church seeking ministry, we are to receive them
 - The people who come with needs and problems are not getting in the way of ministry...they ARE the ministry
 - How ironic was it that disciples sent away mothers and children in need because they were too busy discussing biblical marriage!
 - That is Pharisaic thinking in a nutshell...missing the forest for the trees, straining a gnat and swallowing a camel
 - Spending endless hours debating minutia of Scripture while simultaneously overlooking its plain and obvious demands
 - Spending time discussing Scripture isn't wrong...the issue of divorce is important and deserves to be discussed
 - The problem was they forgot the purpose in understanding such matters...it is so that we serve the needs of the Kingdom better
 - We learn the Bible so we can live like Jesus and serve His purposes during the present age
 - We seek to understand how Jesus thought and acted so we can mimic Him in our daily lives and thereby please Him
 - Jesus called us to build the Kingdom one person at a time, and we do that by valuing everyone that Jesus valued
 - Because at the end of the day, Church and the Kingdom aren't going to be built by winning debates on doctrine
 - The Kingdom will be built by showing the love of Christ to a lost and hurting world and ministering to them in their needs
 - And doing so in order to build a bridge for sharing the Gospel
 - And that's the key...we are serving them for the sake of the Kingdom of God, Jesus says, which means that our purpose in our service must be saving souls

- We will often begin our ministry by serving earthly needs, but if our service never goes beyond the physical, then ultimately it fails
 - Our fundamental purpose in ministry must always be to gain an opportunity to present the truth of Jesus as Savior
 - We feed or clothe or heal or comfort or teach or whatever we do for the sole purpose of turning those moments to a presentation of the Gospel
 - How we make that turn will vary by circumstances, and the timing could be weeks or months or even years after our service begins
 - But it never stops being the purpose of our ministry
- How ironic it would be if we worked hard in doing good things to gain opportunities to present the Gospel...only to never present it in the end
 - We've treated the body in some respect and then left the soul condemned
 - We've solved a temporary problem while neglecting to address the eternal problem
- This short-sighted approach to ministry is an ever-present temptation for the Church and we can see evidence of it everywhere
 - There are many present-day secular organizations that began as Christian ministries of one form or another
 - Harvard, Yale, Princeton and other universities began as Christian entities intent on promoting the faith
 - There are adoption agencies, relief organizations, homeless agencies, and others that were formed as Christian missions
 - Yet today some of these "Christian" organizations prohibit volunteers from evangelizing those they serve
- In effect they are disobeying Jesus' words found here in Matthew 19:14
 - The Kingdom of Heaven will be built on serving the likes of these
 - And that service must move to a presentation of the Gospel if it is to fulfill Christ's intended purpose

- Notice in v.15 Jesus called for the children to return to Him, and He proceeded to lay hands on them
 - Laying hands on a person is a gesture of healing, meaning Jesus took time to heal the children as well as the adults in that crowd
 - Which tells us that Jesus was speaking in more than metaphor here
 - As we've learned in earlier chapters, Jesus uses the faith of a child as a metaphor to explain how true faith looks and behaves
 - But had Jesus been speaking of children here solely as a metaphor, He wouldn't have needed to take this next step
 - His point would have been made without the need to call the children back and heal them after all
 - That tells us Jesus was expecting the disciples to hear His words both figuratively and literally
 - The Kingdom of God is made of such as these children, meaning the Kingdom Program includes the lowly in society
 - But secondly, the Kingdom Program even includes little children, so literal children are also candidates for receiving the Gospel
 - And therefore, we must include everyone in our ministry to spread the Gospel lest we pass by someone God intends to save
 - Remember what Paul told us would be true in the Church...

1Cor. 1:26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble;

1Cor. 1:27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong,
1Cor. 1:28 and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are,

1Cor. 1:29 so that no man may boast before God.

1Cor. 1:30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,

1Cor. 1:31 so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

- Notice Paul reaffirms Jesus' promise that the Kingdom of God will include such as these, meaning the weak and foolish things
 - Weak and foolish and despised refer to the outcasts of society, but they equally apply to children
 - Children are not weak by choice nor are they foolish for any fault of their own...they are simply too young to do or know better
 - Nevertheless, they too are within God's reach to bring saving faith, and therefore we cannot dismiss them in the course of our work
- In fact, Paul says that though the world looks down on the lowly, the Lord specifically favors these groups in His plan of salvation
 - Paul says the Lord chooses these above others to receive the news of the Gospel and to believe
 - And that includes children who are often the recipient of God's grace
- Children of a very young age can be brought to faith by the Holy Spirit, even children too young to express that faith to us
 - And the Bible gives us at least two examples of that happening
 - First, we have an Old Testament example of David, who by his own testimony was brought to saving faith as an infant

Psa. 22:8 "Commit yourself to the LORD; let Him deliver him;
Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him."

Psa. 22:9 Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb;
You made me trust when upon my mother's breasts.

Psa. 22:10 Upon You I was cast from birth;
You have been my God from my mother's womb.

- David says that as he exited his mother's womb, he was cast upon God as if God caught David leaving the birth canal
- And moreover, he says God had been David's God from the moment He formed David in his mother's womb
- And then in v.9 David says plainly that God made David to trust in Him – meaning to receive saving faith – from the time David was nursing

- Traditionally, children in that day were weaned at age 5 so David is saying that saving faith came to him before the age of 5
- Obviously, the Lord moved early in David's life to author faith in David's heart knowing where God would take David later in life
- And then we have a New Testament example that is even more dramatic...the case of John the Baptist
 - In Luke we're told that John the Baptist was marked out by God for saving faith while still in the womb

Luke 1:13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.

Luke 1:14 "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

Luke 1:15 "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

Luke 1:16 "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.

- While John the Baptist was still in the womb of Elizabeth, the Lord had already given him the Holy Spirit and a mission
 - Clearly, John had never heard the Gospel at that point, much less possessed the intellect to understand it
 - And of course, John had no say so in the matter of how God would use him in service to the Gospel as an adult
 - The Lord sovereignly selected John for his special role and gave John the faith and the Holy Spirit to ensure it was completed
 - And the Lord did these things while John was still forming in His mother's womb
- The point of these two examples is clear to see...we cannot rule out saving faith for anyone at anytime
 - If God can bring faith to David while nursing or to John while in the womb, who is unreachable by God?
 - And the same can be said for adults, of course

- If Saul of Tarsus who terrorized and murdered Christians could be converted, then is any adult too hardened to be won over by the Gospel?
- Clearly, we are not all David or John or Paul, but my point is that if God can bring those men to faith in the way He did, He can do it for anyone
 - And since we don't know God's intentions beforehand, we must see every person – even children – as candidates for salvation
 - Because God can move in the heart of a person regardless of age
 - You can be born again by the Spirit when you're 99 or when you're 9
 - The Lord can bring saving faith to a person when they are 102 or barely 2
 - Now as I say that, some will ask how can a 2-year old confess Christ, and the answer is of course a 2-year old can't utter a confession of faith
 - They will not make that confession until they are considerably older and when prompted by someone's invitation
 - But what we're learning here is that the Spirit can bring a person faith years before they are able to give evidence of it
 - And the examples of David and John the Baptist testify to that very real possibility
 - And in fact, doesn't it always work this way for all of us no matter what age we come to faith in the Gospel?
 - Aren't the confessions of our mouths always a delayed expression of the faith in our hearts?
 - Remember Jesus said in Matthew 15 that what comes out of our mouths is always a reflection of what dwells in our hearts
 - So we don't come to faith because we utter a confession...we utter a confession because we have come to faith
 - For example, when we say "I'm hungry," aren't we already feeling the hunger pangs in our stomach?
 - Or when we say "I have a headache," does the pain begin after we say those words or did we say the words because we felt pain?

- Did you say "I love you" to your spouse, and then you experienced the attraction and emotion?
- Or did you say "I love you" because you already had feelings for them?
- Likewise, we speak a confession of faith because something has already changed in our hearts
 - And considerable time may pass between the arrival of faith and the expression of that faith
 - Even as adults, many of us held to a belief in Jesus for a time before something led us to speak it out loud
 - And so it can be for a child who confesses Christ at age 6, 7 or even much older...their faith may have arrived much earlier
 - That's why the Bible says that saving faith finds its home in our heart, not in our brain, the thinking organ of our bodies
 - Scripture uses the metaphor of heart and not head to emphasize that salvation doesn't come from an intellectual assent
 - Salvation comes from a change in our spirit, our heart, which is done by the Holy Spirit (which the Bible calls being born again)
 - And changing our spirit is something only God can do, which is why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:10 that it is by His doing that you are in Christ Jesus
 - So parents, take encouragement and comfort knowing that the God who saved you by faith can extend that same grace to your children
 - God's grace is not limited by chronological age and salvation is not out of reach simply because a person cannot speak yet
 - Nor is salvation impossible because someone has grown old and cranky and is openly hostile to the Gospel
 - No one is out of reach of the Lord
- Now does this mean we should evangelize infants? Do we explain propitiation and substitutionary atonement to 2 year olds?
 - No...we need to remember the context of Jesus' words to understand the proper application

- He said bring me the children because the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these
 - The Greek word belongs is *eimi* which means exists, so Jesus said the Kingdom of God exists for such as these
 - The Kingdom Program, the Church's mission, exists to reach those like these children
- So our application is simple...our very mission is to reach those who come to us in need, no matter who they are or what their need may be
 - Some will come to us as adults with very adult needs
 - And we minister to them in the expectation that God may work through those relationships to bring a heart to faith
 - The church can't supply every need or accommodate every request, and in some cases the best ministry may be to say no to a particular need
 - But regardless of how we deal with the physical need, we do our best to show kindness and love and regard for the person
 - And we do this not merely for the sake of the need itself, but so that through that connection we might also minister to their soul with the Gospel
 - But sometimes those who come will be children brought by their mothers and fathers, and when that happens we see those children as candidates for ministry as well
 - We don't wait for children to reach some age that we think means they are ready to understand the Gospel
 - We don't waste our opportunities by entertaining children without offering them meaningful ministry
 - I've heard many parents remark to me about how much their young child has retained from my teaching to their surprise
- So the application is simple...minister to everyone, meeting them where they are in their need and offering them more than a physical solution
 - Rule out no one, look past no one, remembering that God is capable of saving anyone
 - He is the Author of our faith, so He can bring faith to people of any age or station of life

- And He has called us to be His representative to the world, and especially to those the world has cast aside