

# CHILDREN WITHOUT MERIT

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**BY DR. JOEL HOUSTON**  
NIPAWIN BIBLE COLLEGE

As Fall approaches, my wife and I found ourselves hurrying about the house, frantically trying to prepare our oldest son for another year of school. Last minute trips to the department store, the making of lists (of which there is no end), and less prayer than there should have been accompanied the realization that many of us spend a lot of our time and resources ensuring our children are fully and completely equipped for whatever life brings them. Children, understandably, require the lion’s share of our care and attention. This simple fact, however, can colour our interpretation of the scriptures, and in particular, the occasion of Jesus welcoming and blessing the little children.

The heartwarming story of Jesus receiving children and blessing them is rightly cherished (Luke 18:15-17). The story is shared by each of the writers of the synoptic gospels and Luke’s report is almost certainly sourced entirely from Mark’s account of the same story (Mk 10:13-16).<sup>1</sup> Luke, however, tips his hand as a physician and directs his attention to a vital aspect of this event that

contains within it an important interpretive key

*...his mercy is for those  
who fear him from  
generation to  
generation.  
He has shown strength  
with his arm;  
He has scattered the  
proud in the  
thoughts of their  
hearts;  
- Luke 1:50-51*

for us. In Luke 18:15, we can nearly hear Luke’s voice of astonishment as he records the fact that “they were bringing even infants [!] to him that he might touch them.”

To those acculturated to the practices

1. Howard Marshall, Commentary on Luke in TNIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 681.

of infant baptism or child-dedication, it might be perfectly natural that parents might seek a blessing for their children—after all, children are “a heritage from the Lord” (Ps. 127:3), and despite their more devilish qualities when causing trouble, justly protected and welcome members of society. The 7th Article of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have, among other rights, “the right from birth to a name.”<sup>2</sup> This simple ascription of identity might seem to us rather natural—for the modern view of children suggests they have innate merit, regardless of status or accomplishment. This, however, has not always been the majority view. Robert H. Stein has noted that, “in the first century a child was an insignificant, weak member of society and so exemplified one who is ‘least.’”<sup>3</sup> Joel Green agreed, and further pointed out that in Greco-Roman society, “[children] possessed little if any intrinsic value as human beings.”<sup>4</sup>

Green helpfully directs us to the reality that Luke’s evident surprise—“even infants”—is the key to understanding the disciples’ reticence to allow the parents to access Jesus with their children: why should Jesus bother entertaining children? Unproductive, meritless non-members of society?<sup>5</sup> Often the interpretation of this passage points to the laudable qualities of children as being the basis for Jesus’ commendation of them to the disciples in vv. 16-17. This is misguided. James R. Edwards argues instead, “Jesus does not bless the children for their virtues, but for their deficits. They are important because of what they lack—they are small, powerless, without sophistication, overlooked and dispossessed. Jesus thus emphasizes in the strongest possible way that the kingdom is offered to the helpless, needy, powerless, and weak. Indeed, it belongs to them.”<sup>6</sup>

The Kingdom is not only offered to those with no perceived worthiness; in the instance of Jesus’ admonition to the disciples, we realize that the Kingdom of God must be “received” in the same

manner as we receive the least in society.<sup>7</sup> Again, to emphasize that Jesus’ words in v.17 suggest that disciples are to receive the Kingdom in a state of childlike acceptance (or in accordance with some goodness that Jesus was commending in the children) is to miss the point. “Receiving little children” stated Green, “is tantamount to granting them hospitality...Jesus is asking his followers to embrace a topsy-turvy system of values and to extend respectful service to that social group most often overlooked.”<sup>8</sup>

Today, if we were to suggest that some children were without an innate sense of worth, or merit, we would be fairly pilloried. The idea offends our deepest sensibilities. Of course children are valuable; they are to be loved, protected, and nourished. Yet we must examine ourselves—do we extend this sense of righteous indignation to all persons when their worthiness is denigrated? Do we have an urge to actively guard the value and merit of the downtrodden, and social pariah? As I prepared my child for school, I wondered about the potential discontinuity between how much time and money I spend on my children, and the care and attention I direct to those whom Jesus’ declared worthy of hospitality. Indeed, what about those who, in our society, are the social equivalent to children in the first century? Or what about those in societies that are not our own—where conditions of injustice and oppression ravage whole communities? Are they our responsibility? Are they children without merit?

2. The full declaration may be found at: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf>
3. Robert H. Stein, *Luke in TNAC* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 293.
4. Green, *The Gospel of Luke in TNICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 650.
5. “Especially when a ‘ruler’ was waiting in the wings (v 18)?” Green, *Luke*, 650-1.
6. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke, TPNTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 509-10.
7. Green, *Luke*, 651.
8. Green, *Luke*, 651.

**Dr. Joel Houston** (PhD, University of Manchester) is an instructor in Biblical and Theological Studies at Nipawin Bible College, Saskatchewan. A committed believer that Evangelicalism remains, at its core, a justice-oriented expression of the faith, Joel’s research and writing seeks to serve the broader church by encouraging and resourcing Christians to consider the totality of Christ’s redemptive work in all areas of society.

