

30 July 2023 on Sunday 9.00 am and 10.30 am

# LIKE A CHILD

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell  
Presbyterian Church

## READINGS:



**Genesis 2:18-24**

**18 The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”**

**19 Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. 20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.**

**But for Adam no suitable helper was found. 21 So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. 22 Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.**

**23 The man said,**

**“This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called ‘woman,’  
for she was taken out of man.”**

**24 That is why a man leaves his father and  
mother and is united to his wife, and they  
become one flesh.**

### **Hebrews 1:1-4**

**1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors  
through the prophets at many times and in  
various ways, 2 but in these last days he has  
spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed  
heir of all things, and through whom also he  
made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance  
of God’s glory and the exact representation of  
his being, sustaining all things by his powerful  
word. After he had provided purification for  
sins, he sat down at the right hand of the  
Majesty in heaven. 4 So he became as much  
superior to the angels as the name he has  
inherited is superior to theirs.**

## **Mark 10:13-16**

### The Little Children and Jesus

**13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” 16 And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.**

### **SCRIPTURE SENTENCE**

**“And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.”**

**Matthew 10:16**

## **INTRODUCTION**

**Having one child makes you a parent;  
having two you are a referee. David Frost**

**There is only one pretty child in the world,  
and every mother has it. anon**

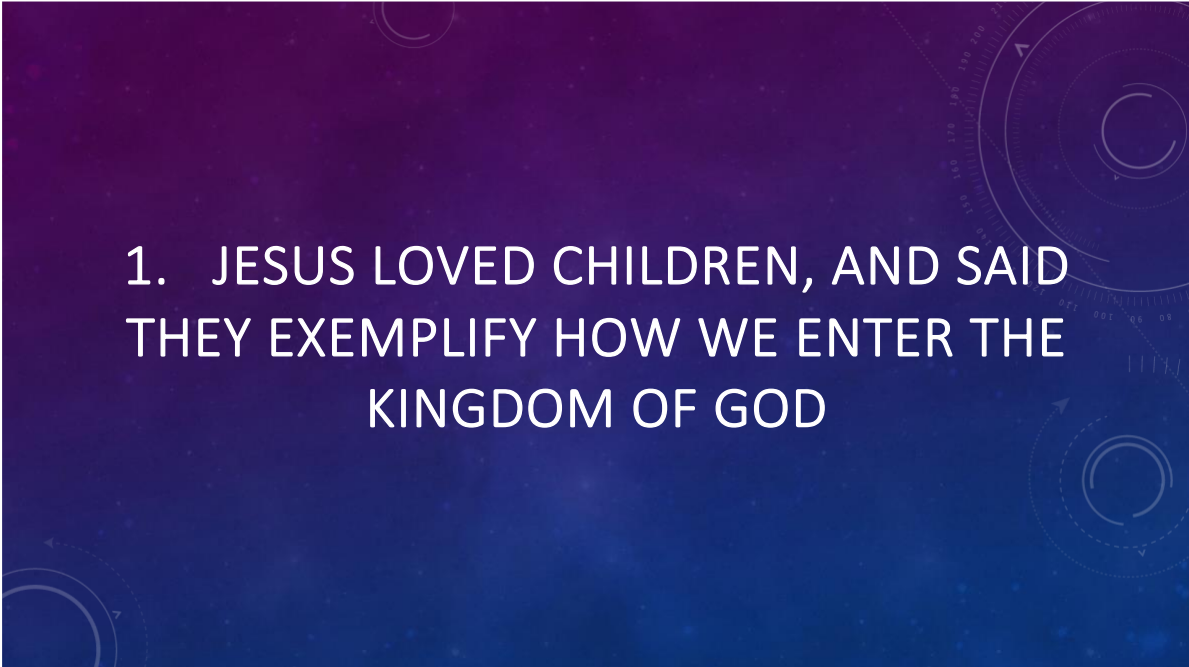
**Martin Luther found great comfort in and  
inspiration from his children.**

**Disturbed and depressed by his enemies,  
one day he noticed his son little Martin  
nursing in his mother's arms and  
remarked, "Child, your enemies are the  
Pope, the Bishops, Duke George  
Ferdinand, and the devil. And there you  
are ... unconcerned." Even as he noticed  
his child's complete trust, he realized his  
own anxiety.**

**On another occasion Luther came upon  
Anasthasia, his four-year-old daughter,  
prattling away about Christ, angels, and**

heaven. And Luther said, “My dear child, if only one could hold fast to this faith.” Quickly Anasthasia replied, “Why, Papa, don’t you believe it?” Luther was shocked and later wrote, “Christ has made the children our teachers.”

**Jesus said, “suffer the little children come to unto me and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Mark 10:14**



1. JESUS LOVED CHILDREN, AND SAID  
THEY EXEMPLIFY HOW WE ENTER THE  
KINGDOM OF GOD

# 1. JESUS LOVED CHILDREN, AND SAID THEY EXEMPLIFY HOW WE ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD

**“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall not enter into it.”**

The kingdom of God in its idea, its essence, is the rule and the authority of God in our lives, community, and nation.

The sphere in which God bears rule, is either the life of the individual, the society, or groupings of them.

When Jesus speaks of its acceptance, it is the rule itself which is meant. We are to accept God's rule in our life.

So, what does this mean?

Well, I find this controversial and confronting ...  
what do you think?

It is to be accepted with unquestioning trust and dependence, as a child trusts, and depends on parental rule.

Now, it is interesting to note, the gospel material on Jesus and children in Mark sees Jesus described as “indignant” with his disciples ... for hindering the approach of the children ... towards him.

But Mark says Jesus blessed the children. And this has had a steady influence on the life of the church ... through the centuries.



CHILDREN, YOU SEE, OCCUPIED A PRECARIOUS POSITION IN THE HELLENISTIC SOCIETY OF THE FIRST CENTURY.

SOMETIMES CHILDREN WERE LOVED AND SOMETIMES EXPLOITED, DEPENDING UPON HOW THEY WERE PERCEIVED AS BENEFITING THE FAMILY.



Children, you see, occupied a precarious position in the Hellenistic society of the first century.

Sometimes children were loved and sometimes exploited, depending upon how they were perceived as benefiting the family.

For example, a **papyrus letter written by a man named Hilarion** (which ironically means “cheerful”) to his expectant wife, Alis, dated June 17, 1 B.C., instructs her: **“if it was a male child let it [live]; if it was female, cast it out.”**

This practice of infanticide was severely attacked by the Christian Church, which rightly boasted, for example in The Epistle of Diognetus, that it did not expose its children.

Alarminglly, the practice was not outlawed in Roman law until A.D. 375. Even then the law was not very effective.

Roman law gave the father absolute power (patria potestas) over his family ... which extended to life and death.

As late as A.D. 60 a son was put to death by the simple order of his father.

Further evidence of the nature of the world ... to which the gospel came ... is seen in the family abuses of the house of Herod ... and his public slaughter of babies at the Advent (Matthew 2:16–20).

Children clearly were not always presumed to be a blessing in the non-Christian culture of Christ's day.

Now, how refreshing then was the Biblical, Hebrew, culture where children were seen as gifts from the Lord.

Rachel spoke as the mother of her people when she cried, **"Give me children, or I'll die!"** (Genesis 30:1).

Hannah prayed in the Temple for a child. When God answered, she named him Samuel (**"God has heard"**). And she later gave Samuel to the Lord's service (1 Samuel 1:20, 28).

Hebrew culture, you see, elevated the family and children!

Mark 10 shows a further elevation of children by our Lord.

The account opens in verse 13 with Mark telling us that **“People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him bless them, but the disciples rebuked them.”**

What does this mean? ... As best we can gather, fathers and mothers, and perhaps older children, were bringing young children, many of whom were babies to Jesus for his blessing.

This was in keeping with a classic Jewish custom ... which dated all the way back to the time ... when the patriarch Israel ... laid his hands upon the heads of Ephraim and Manasseh ... and blessed them (Genesis 48:14).

**It was all very proper, traditional, and wonderful.**

**Proud parents ... held out their precious children ... to Jesus, who took them in his arms where they snuggled close. He placed his hand ... on**

their warm little heads ...and lifting his eyes to Heaven, pronounced a blessing.

So, Jesus loved children, and said they exemplify how we are to enter the kingdom of God.

This is utterly profound ... and merits our attention for a moment ... in order to understand what Jesus was saying.



## 2. ARE CHILDREN IMPORTANT TODAY?


## 2. WELL, ARE CHILDREN IMPORTANT TODAY?

This is a great question ... and is important in a wide-ranging discussion on abortion, child poverty, and policies around the care and protection of children.

Certainly, in the church, children should be exalted. I give you several reasons why.

**CHARLES SPURGEON**

I WILL EVEN ASTONISH YOU STILL ... BY SAYING THAT I HAVE SOMETIMES MET WITH A DEEPER SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IN CHILDREN OF TEN AND TWELVE ... THAN I HAVE IN CERTAIN PERSONS OF FIFTY AND SIXTY.



Firstly, as Charles Spurgeon, one of the greatest preachers and pastors in London in the 19 century, said:

**“I will say broadly that I have more confidence in the spiritual life of the children I have received into this church than I have in the spiritual condition of the adults.**

**I will go even further than that and say I have usually found a clearer knowledge of the gospel and a warmer love for Christ in the child-converts than in the adult-converts.**

**I will even astonish you still ... by saying that I have sometimes met with a deeper spiritual experience in children of ten and twelve ... than I have in certain persons of fifty and sixty.”**

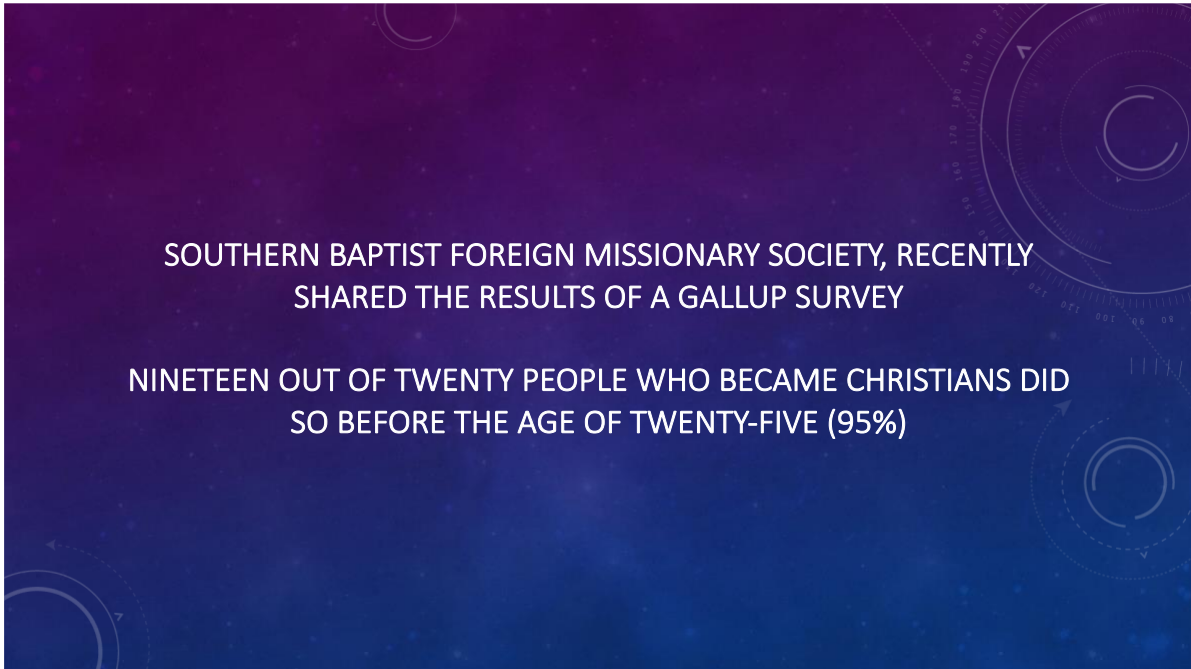
Now, I understand what Charles Spurgeon was saying here.

**Because I know someone ... who from the earliest of years ... has always loved God ... from before she understood what all it meant ... for she always loved the Lord and prayed.**

**And she wrote this letter to an adult neighbour who was sick ...**

**And when she was a child and heard her minister say that he ‘would not be surprised in the least if they found the bones of Jesus in Israel today’ ... she thought. ‘what’ ‘that can’t be true ... my Jesus is alive ... he is raised from the dead ... he is a bad minister’.**

So, the spiritual life of children can be very real and we should never underestimate the significance of God in their tender lives.



SOUTHERN BAPTIST FOREIGN MISSIONARY SOCIETY, RECENTLY  
SHARED THE RESULTS OF A GALLUP SURVEY

NINETEEN OUT OF TWENTY PEOPLE WHO BECAME CHRISTIANS DID  
SO BEFORE THE AGE OF TWENTY-FIVE (95%)



And, secondly, children are important according to the findings of a Gallup Survey. Jim Slack, head of demographics for the Southern Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, recently shared the results of a Gallup Survey:

**Nineteen out of twenty people who became Christians did so before the age of twenty-five (95%).**

**At age twenty-five, one in 10,000 will become believers;**

**at thirty-five, one in 50,000;**

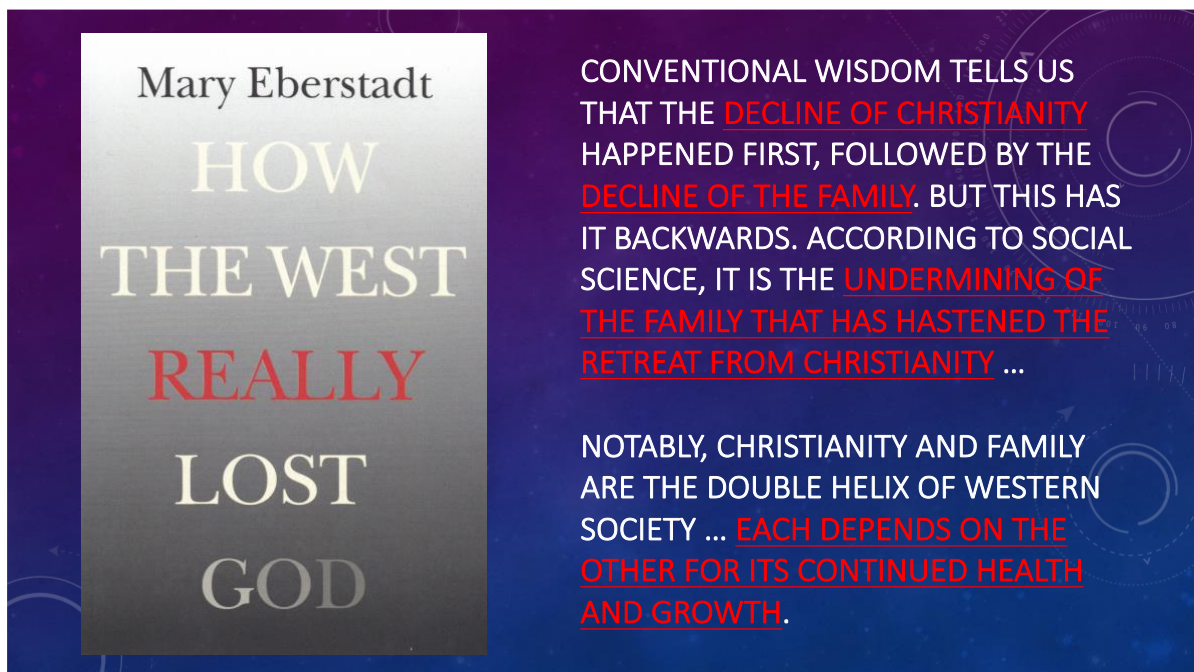
**at forty-five, one in 200,000;**

**at fifty-five, one in 300,000;**

**at seventy-five, one in 700,000.**

So, what a call for parents, young people, Bible school teachers, and youth group workers to keep at it!

Children, you see, are important for the life and growth of the church. And, more to the point, the years of childhood and youth provide an amazing ... and unequalled ... opportunity to know God. Don't you find that interesting?



Now, let me tell you about an extraordinary book, '*How the West really lost God*', by Mary Eberstadt, Templeton Press, 2013.

Mary Eberstadt argues that conventional wisdom tells us that the decline of Christianity happened

first, followed by the decline of the family. But this, she believes, has it back to front.

According to social science, it is the undermining of the family that has hastened the retreat from Christianity ...

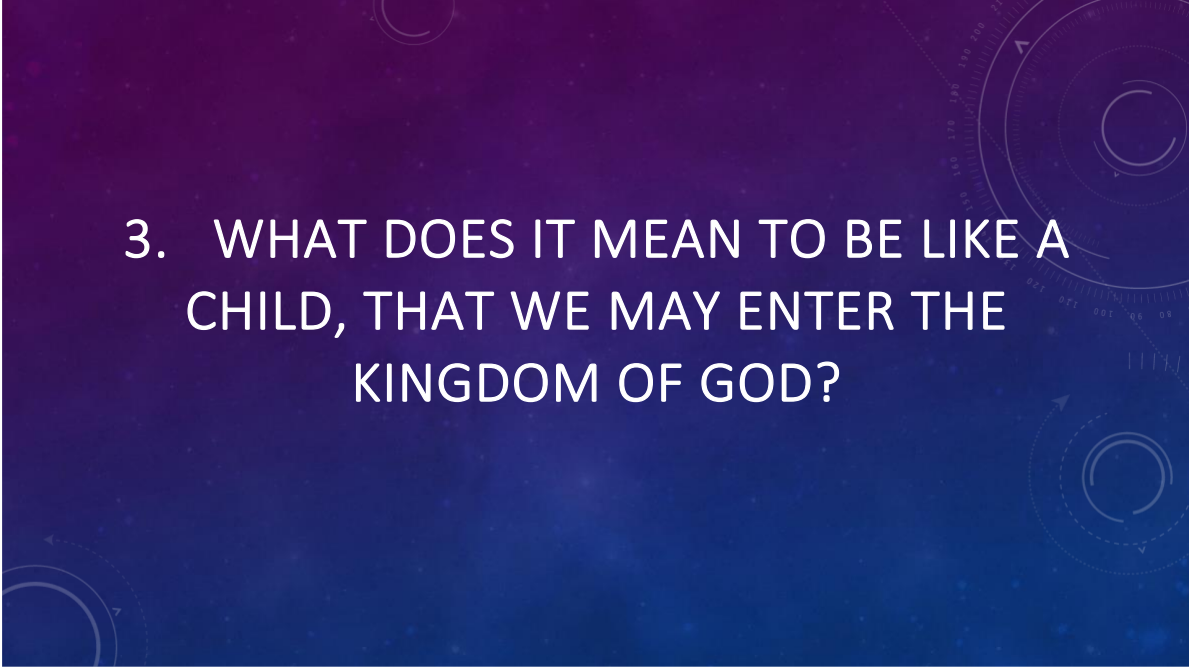
And, notably, Christianity and family are the double helix of Western society ... each depends on the other for its continued health and growth.

Yes, children are incredibly important to Jesus, to the church, and evidently to Western society.

If we don't care for children, if we undermine family, then demonstrably the Christian faith retreats ... in a symbiotic double helix fashion.

Now, that is something to really ponder, don't you think?!

And while we must never resort to extracting bogus conversions from them ... but like Jesus we must cultivate their spiritual awareness and sensitivity ... and above all ... pray fervently and in detail for them.



3. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE LIKE A CHILD, THAT WE MAY ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

**3. THIRDLY, WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE LIKE A CHILD, THAT WE MAY ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD?**

Hear our Lord's words: **“I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”**

The word translated “never” is very strong.

The New Testament scholar William Lane comments: **“The solemn pronouncement is directed to the disciples ... but it has pertinence for all people confronted by the gospel ... because it speaks of the condition for entrance into the Kingdom of God.”**

No one ... will get into the Kingdom of God ... unless he or she receives God's salvation .. like a child. No one!

OK, Tony, so how are we to understand and apply this?

For starters, coming as a “little child” does not infer innocence. Any two-year-old dispels such a notion!

I have in my mind's eye the all-knowing devious grin of my delightful granddaughter ... Innocent? ... I don't think so!



No, what Jesus has in mind here ... is an objective state in which every child who has ever lived ... regardless of race, culture, or background, has experienced ... namely, helpless dependence.

Every single child in the world is absolutely, completely, totally, objectively, subjectively, existentially ... helpless!

And so, it is with every child who is born into the Kingdom of God.

People of the Kingdom ... enter it helpless ... for whom everything must be done.

Do you remember the words of the hymn “Rock of Ages”?

**Nothing in my hands I bring,  
Simply to Thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress,  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace:  
Foul, I to the fountain fly,  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.**

There is no other fundamental meaning for verse 15, I believe.

So, have you come to Christ like this?

Is it his grace plus your nothingness?

Or are you part of the ... Jesus plus movement ...  
Jesus on the cross plus your good works ... your  
denomination ... or plus Mary ... the saints ...  
your moral ... and spiritual practice?

Now, the realization that one is as helpless as a child should naturally foster humility.

And Jesus gave reference to this elsewhere saying,





**"I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, UNLESS YOU CHANGE AND  
BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN, YOU WILL NEVER ENTER  
THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. THEREFORE, WHOEVER  
HUMBLES HIMSELF LIKE THIS CHILD IS THE GREATEST IN  
THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN" MATTHEW 18:3, 4**

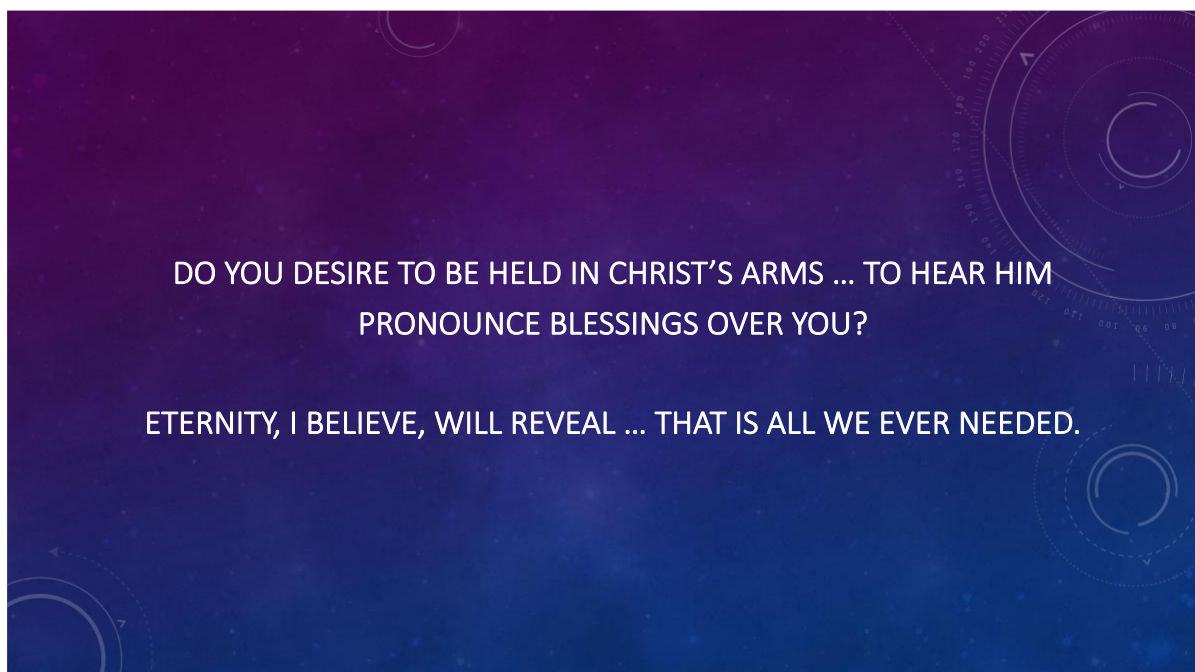
**"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3, 4).**

But you see, I think many in the world refuse to come to Christ on these terms ... perhaps because of pride and independence.

Come as a helpless child? How humiliating! But Jesus says, "That is the way you must come ... as a baby, in profound dependence."

Think about what happens to the waiting children:

**“And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them” (v. 16).**



Do you desire to be held in Christ's arms ... to hear him pronounce blessings over you?

**Eternity, I believe, will reveal ... that is all we ever needed.**

So, Jesus has elevated the status and dignity of children.

He also believed ... they can know him as truly as anyone else ... they can enter the Kingdom of God ... they can have a vibrant relationship with him.

Jesus elevated children.

And he said, poignantly ... and ... disturbingly, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without this helpless dependence and humility.

Jesus said, **“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”**

AMEN