

What is a Christian?

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[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 10 verse 13 to 16 and Alvina is going to come and read for us. Good morning. Okay. People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them but the disciples rebuked them. 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. Truly I tell you anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter in. And he took the children in his arms placed his hands on them and blessed them.

Thank you so much Alvina. Let's pray and ask for the Lord's help as we look at his word. Let's pray. Father we do want to ask just now that you might give us open hearts to understand and receive your words. There are many things that would snatch it away many things that would distract us.

Please we pray help us to trust what you say and hear it carefully in Jesus name. Amen. Now I think this morning that the passage itself is really very very simple. If you're a child in the room I think even you would have understood the passage this morning unless you zoned out while Alvina was reading it. It's very simple isn't it? People are bringing children to Jesus probably parents or maybe older siblings or some of the older children might be coming themselves but the disciples stop them. They don't do that. Jesus rebukes them tells them off and say the children are allowed to come to Jesus and he blesses them. And that's it right? That's that's all there is in the story. But despite the story's simplicity what I want to suggest to us this morning is that this story in the New Testament is really really really important. It appears in all the synoptic gospels.

It's there in Matthew. It's in Mark and it's in Luke. And its importance comes from the fact that what you've got in this very small very simple story is a summary of what it means to be a Christian.

It is if you like a visual illustration of what it means to live the Christian life. It's an active parable of of what a Christian is how you become a Christian and then how you know that you're a Christian. And so I thought it would be good for us at the start of this new term to start here with a very simple sermon very clear sermon hopefully on what it means to be a Christian how you become a Christian and then how you know that you're a Christian. Those are three really important questions and I want to show you how this very simple story answers them. So the first one is this what is a Christian? What is a Christian? Now I want you to notice that Jesus's assumption here is made in his rebuke of the disciples. I don't know if you noticed it noticed it.

[3 : 11] I think this might be the trickiest thing this morning so if you get this you'll get it all. It's there at the end of verse 14 when Jesus says of the children the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Notice Jesus's assumption with me. Notice that he is assuming that it is a good thing to have the kingdom of God belonging to you. The kingdom of God is the prize of the passage. It's the treasure and Jesus's rebuke of the disciples is based on the idea that these children have received something which the disciples themselves should want for themselves. They should be and should want to be recipients of the same thing that the children have. In fact in the story they think they already have it but turn out not to. Now that's worth thinking about some more. Let's just state it really simply and unpack it a bit. Jesus's definition of a Christian here is someone who has received a place in the kingdom of God. The kingdom belongs to them to use the language.

Now I'm guessing that might sound strange to you this morning. Maybe you're not a Christian this morning and if someone was to ask you you know what what is a Christian or maybe you are a Christian and someone asked you tomorrow you know what does it mean for you to be a Christian? I don't think you would state it like this probably. You might say oh a Christian is someone who has faith or a Christian who is someone who who thinks in a certain way about the world or a Christian is someone who is committed to moral living. But that's not what Jesus says is it? He doesn't say to such belongs great faith or great morality or great insight. They have the kingdom of God. No he doesn't say it like that does he? Rather he says to such belongs the kingdom. Now why would he speak that way?

What is the kingdom of God? Well to see that we just need to zoom out a little bit from this story and listen to what Jesus has been saying all the way through his ministry and you'll find that Jesus has been repeating this idea of the kingdom of God over and over and over again. The very first words of Jesus recorded in Mark's gospel are these, the time has come, Jesus said, the kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news. In other words Jesus's message is that God has a kingdom, a place, a place where God rules. It's a place of goodness, a place of grace, a place occupied by people who belong to him and Jesus says listen don't think about that place as being Jerusalem, it's not Galilee, instead that place is a place that I am bringing. You find the place where God rules, God reigns, a place of grace and mercy in me. The kingdom is near says Jesus because I am near. I have arrived so the kingdom has arrived. So Jesus follows up those words with his second words in Mark's gospel which are come and follow me. If you think about it for a moment it makes total sense doesn't it to talk about it like this way. Many of our experiences of life come don't they from the places that we live? A kingdom if you like to which we belong. It works nationally doesn't it? The citizens of certain nations face certain things because that is what is being faced by their nation.

Some of them that's really difficult and hard isn't it if it's war and bombing and destruction. Others it might be great joy and great happiness. I think the survey suggests that Norway I think is is the happiest country. Citizens of Iceland face severe cold and months of darkness.

It works locally as well doesn't it? The place that you live locally. If you live in London you live in a very different place to the rest of the UK. If you live in Kilburn you live in somewhere which is different to Kensington or Chelsea or Fulham. Why? Well because our experiences of life are a result of the place that we live. That's why people move around seeking a better life a better place to live. But Jesus says essentially that the earthly kingdom to which we belong is really if you like a time-limited geography tied image of a greater reality. A reality that he teaches which is in fact that there are in this world two great kingdoms. The kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God.

[7 : 31] The kingdom of this world as he calls it which is the kingdom into which we're all born. A kingdom dominated by death with a future of judgment. A kingdom where we live to please ourselves. We kind of crash into one another causing each other pain and hurt. A kingdom where we think we're in charge but really we're told we're under the power of the ruler of this kingdom. The prince of the power of the air as he's called. The devil. And where we share in his eternal destination in the judgment of hell. That's one great kingdom. The other great kingdom is the kingdom of God.

The place where God rules. Where peace and justice reign. A place of eternal life. A place of healing and wholeness and flourishing. A place where there's no death. A place where there's no judgment because there is no evil. A place where the devil is banished and defeated. And Jesus's assumption is that in a world of two great kingdoms. The kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. You and I the disciples and the children will want to be in the kingdom of God and not the kingdom of this world.

And he says you can only get there through me. I am the gatekeeper of the kingdom of God he says. I alone are the one who brings access to this great kingdom of God. So that being a Christian is about belonging to the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ.

Now let me say to you this morning if if you don't get this definition of what a Christian is then it will be impossible for you to make sense of the demands that Jesus makes of his followers or what how he even talks about living the Christian life. Now if you think for example that the Christian life like lots of preachers on the internet tell you if you think that being a Christian is really mostly about having your best life right now or being a Christian is about how to get your kids through uni without a scratch or how to get the job that you aspire to or how to get the home that you long for. If that's what you think a Christian is then you have massively reduced the Christian life compared to what Jesus says. You know nor is being a Christian about getting God on your side. I've heard some young people talk about it like this as if being a Christian is knowing that God is on my side as if he's on my team not by my side like we were singing but on my side as if God takes my commands and does what I want him to do. No the Christian life as Jesus presents it in this story is way bigger than any of that. Being a Christian according to Jesus' definition here is nothing less than moving your eternal destination from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God.

Being a Christian says Jesus is about entering a kingdom and receiving a citizenship in the kingdom of God that will stretch through the suffering of this life and into eternity into a resurrection life in a world remade by his power and his glory when Jesus returns when what we receive spiritually now takes over even our physical lives when Jesus returns and brings the kingdom of God with him.

[10 : 35] That's why isn't it that when you become a Christian life doesn't suddenly become easy. If you become a Christian it's not that all your struggles in life get fixed. Christians still face cancer and redundancy and relationship breakdown and homelessness and depression and anxiety because the transfer of citizenship from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God reflects something that is still yet to come and not here and now.

Jesus says the kingdom of God is at hand but it's not yet finally here. Jesus is not yet finally here. He has not yet returned. So this is the story's definition of being a Christian. It's being a citizen of the kingdom of God.

Someone who has been transferred from death to life. From hell to glory. From rebellion to life with God. From seeking to live their best life now to knowing that the best is still to come when Jesus returns.

That's what a Christian is. Someone who has received a place in the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ. Second point then. How do I become a Christian? How do I become a Christian? Now this is the real meat of the passage isn't it?

And why it's so important for us this morning. This is what is acted out in the story in a way that you can't miss. Access to the kingdom of God as we were hearing earlier with the children is not by religious heritage.

[11 : 55] It's not by obedience. It's not even by actions that are only doable by adults. No. Citizenship of glory belonging to the kingdom of God is received as a gift.

In other words the unmistakable lesson of this simple story is this. It's profound but it's very simple. You cannot through any action of your own make yourself a Christian.

You can't do that because it is not an action of your own that makes you a Christian. It is receiving the action of the Lord Jesus that makes you a Christian. You receive Christian life from Jesus as a gift.

That's why children are such a good example isn't it? We were learning this weren't we? It's not because children are innocent. You don't have to hang out with children for very long before that myth is busted right?

Children are not perfect. Nor is it even because all of these children here would become Christians at some time in the future and Jesus was just anticipating it. No. The point is that children are brilliant at accepting gifts.

[13 : 02] So they teach us what a Christian is. Just look again at what he says. Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

People like them. Truly I tell you anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. There was a church in Oxford that one Christmas time decided that a really brilliant way of inviting people to their Christmas services was to set up a stall in town giving away chocolate and mince pies to passersby and then handing them an invitation to their carol service and Christmas services and trying to spark up a conversation with them.

They discovered very quickly that it's quite difficult to give adults chocolate and mince pies and free stuff because they wouldn't take it as they walked past. But what they noticed was that a small group of children had worked out what was going on and were walking past taking chocolate, walking around the block and walking past again and taking chocolate and walking around the block again and taking chocolate and were rinsing them for all the mince pies and chocolate that they'd set out.

So much so that the church members had to say to them, listen kids, on your bike, leg it. Because we don't want you stealing all our chocolate. Kids are so good at receiving things, aren't they?

They know, don't they? That if they are going to receive it, they're going to have to accept it freely. They're good at receiving. The why, why kids are good at receiving gets expanded in the verses that follow in the story of the rich man who is unable to enter the kingdom of God because he is unable to give up his money.

[14 : 41] Because here's sort of the nuance of it or the twist of it. Access to the kingdom of God is available as a gift, right? You have to receive it like a little child. But here's the thing. You need an empty hand to receive it.

You need an empty hand to receive it. You need to empty yourself of self-reliance, self-confidence, self-trust. That's why children are so good at receiving gifts, isn't it? Because they know unless they receive it, they won't have it.

And so we need to empty ourselves of our self-confidence, of any confidence in past performance or present performance or promised performance in the future. The only hand that can receive the gift of the kingdom is an empty, childlike hand.

All that I have, I need to receive. That's why, isn't it, the prayer of faith, the prayer of starting the Christian life, if you like, is not, Lord, rescue me and I'll be good in the future.

It's not, Lord, have you seen all these good things that I've done, that I've started coming to church? No, it's this, isn't it? This is the prayer of faith. Lord, I have nothing.

[15 : 47] I have no credit. I have no moral merit. There are no reasons that you should add me to your kingdom. All I am asking is, will you give me what I don't deserve? A place in glory through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Let me say this, that the Bible tells you that this is the hardest thing about being a Christian. The Bible calls this the stumbling block to Christian faith.

The trip hazard, if you like, that most people fall on. You might think that the trip hazard to access to the kingdom of God is because it's really difficult to prove the resurrection or it's science that's disproved God.

No, it's none of those things. It's actually relatively easy to give good answers to that question. Scientists, any scientist who's really worth their science will tell you that science has significant limits, hasn't written off God.

Now, the reason that most people will not contemplate becoming a Christian or won't live the Christian life seriously is because by nature we will not accept that we can bring nothing to God to save ourselves.

[16 : 55] It's so hard for us to do that. To admit that we are hopeless and helpless, sinful and wicked, devoid of any reason in ourselves why God should give us a place in glory, that we are citizens by nature of the kingdom of this world, destined for hell.

That is incredibly offensive. It's called the offense of the gospel. You see it in Jesus' words. Jesus is basically saying to the disciples, listen, if you want to be a resident of the kingdom of God, you have to become like these despised little children.

Like the people who in your culture no one pays any attention to, who no one really bothers with, someone who has no credit to pay, with no status to draw, nothing to lean on other than the generosity of an adult.

You know, our culture kind of deifies children, don't we? We think children are brilliant. We love kids in our culture, until they turn about 14 and hang out on the street corners, and then we hate them. But before that, we kind of think that they're brilliant, don't we?

But in the first century, children were the lowest of the low. They were to be ignored, to be passed over, not to be bothered with. So for Jesus to say, you know, to become a Christian, you need to become like a little child, he's in effect saying to become a Christian is to become a nobody.

[18 : 09] To become a Christian, to receive the kingdom, is to accept this truth of yourself, that you have no merits, no status, nothing. Of course, it's really important, isn't it, to say that a Christian doesn't just do that blindly.

They're not doing this because they've got no self-worth, or they don't understand reality. It's not that, is it? No, becoming a Christian is actually recognizing that the evidence of all of our lives and our world points to the very truth of that statement.

It's unbelief that denies reality, not belief. The sobering truth is that for all of our boasting, our lives are largely lived outside of our control. We have no say in when they start.

We have no say in when they end. We have very little capacity to change the things in between. You didn't decide the gifts that you had. You didn't decide your physical capacities, your intellectual ability.

You didn't decide where you were born. You can't even insist that your mind works properly. And then at the very center of history is not an action of humanity, is it? At the very center of history, a history kind of littered with, ah, screw-ups.

[19 : 17] At the center of history is a great act of a merciful God who came into this world in the person of the Son by donning human flesh, born in a manger, raised in a carpenter's workshop, killed on a Roman cross, who says in Mark chapter 10, verse 45, if you look down at it, that he did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

So the offering the gift of the kingdom is something that Jesus has the right to do because he alone has the moral obedience, the power of justice to make good on his promise.

He alone is the one who can open the door to the kingdom of God and let us in. It's not blind trust, is it? This is a concrete, considering the great realities of life and God's word, that Christ has everything.

I have nothing. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I claim. I've got a dear friend who's not a Christian but goes to church.

It's a bit of a strange thing, I suppose. He basically, over a number of years, has become completely persuaded that the Bible is true. He would argue for it, even. I think the Bible's true.

[20 : 23] I think the resurrection happened. But he's not a Christian. You ask him, why are you not a Christian? He says this. He'll tell you honestly, because he's an honest kind of guy. He says, I'm not a Christian because it would cost me too much.

It would cost me too much. I cannot say that I have nothing to bring. I cannot say that I'm willing to accept that I have an empty hand and need Jesus to give me everything.

I can't accept that. I won't accept that about myself, he says. He refuses to become a child and accept the gift. I said to him in a conversation a while ago, I said, listen, will you go to hell for your pride?

Would you? And the answer of his life is yes, he will. Unless he changes his mind, repents and turns to Christ. So let me ask you this morning, what about you?

Have you accepted that all you have is an empty hand to receive the gift that Christ is offering? Have you accepted that the citizenship that you really need, you have nothing to offer for it?

[21 : 25] No people smugglers can get you there. No one can buy you a visa to that place. No birthplace can appeal to it. No heritage you can claim for it. No parents can do it for you.

Instead, each of us this morning, individually and personally, need to come to Christ with the empty hand and say, Lord, I have nothing. Please give me what I really need, which is access to your kingdom.

I think one of the big dangers for churches is that we assume this. We assume it of one another. We assume that just because you are in church or in around church, this must be true about you. Or because your parents come or because you used to come regularly or because you serve on a rota.

But actually, we must accept we do not become a Christian by attending church or by having the right parents or by saying the right things. The only way to become a Christian is like becoming like a despised first century child.

Which brings us to my final point, which is this. How do I know if I'm a Christian? This is obviously a really, really important point, isn't it? If belonging to the kingdom of God is what a Christian is, and I become a Christian by receiving it as a gift from the Lord Jesus Christ, but I live my life waiting, essentially, for the fruit of receiving that gift, how do I know today if I'm a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, which still in large part is still to come?

[22 : 44] How can I tell that I have moved from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God? How can I know that my sins are forgiven, that I am freed by God and I can live my life for him and his glory, waiting for Christ's return?

What's the mark of that? Well, let me tell you, I think it's very surprising. Look with me closely at the passage and you'll see this. I think the biggest surprise in the passage is one word in verse 14.

In fact, it's such a rare word. It hardly ever appears in the Bible. It's here when we're told that Jesus is indignant with the disciples. He's furious with them.

Now, notice that is an overreaction, yeah? It seems to be an overreaction. All the disciples did was try and stop these children from coming to Jesus and hassling him. The disciples of Jesus are trying, essentially, to protect him.

They're trying to give him some space, allow him a bit of me time. You know, surely, you know, Jesus has been working hard, he's been preaching and he's been going around. Look, Jesus, just have a bit of time to yourself.

[23 : 47] We'll deal with these kids. We'll stop them coming. You know, I kind of think when you see it like that, surely something more gentle is in order from Jesus, isn't it? Listen, don't worry about it, guys. I don't mind.

I'm not that tired. I've got enough time for these kids. Just let them come. Let them come. It'll be all right. Just let them come. Just don't worry about it. But instead, what you're told is that Jesus is indignant. He is super cross with him.

He's like angry, angry. Why would he be so cross? Well, the answer to that is in chapter 9. In the previous page, chapter 9, verse 33. Turn back a page and you'll see it in your Bible.

The disciples here have been having a discussion, I suppose really an argument, about who is the greatest. They want to know who's the most important disciple. And Jesus responds to them like this. Look at verse 35.

Sitting down, Jesus called the 12 and said, anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all. Listen, this argument about who's the greatest, that is totally irrelevant because you've got things upside down.

[24 : 47] And he took a little child, verse 36, whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.

and whoever welcomes me, sorry, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but the one who sent me. Sorry, my eye's doing tricks there. Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but the one who sent me.

Do you see this? Jesus says that welcoming the child is the sign that you've welcomed Jesus. And welcoming Jesus is the sign that you've welcomed the father.

And welcoming the father, essentially is the sign that you belong to the kingdom of God, right? I'll bring that back to chapter 10. And now you can understand, can't you, why Jesus is so indignant with the disciples. Why is Jesus so indignant that the disciples are not welcoming the children?

Because it's not the children they're rejecting, but him. Do you see that? They're not just rejecting Jesus, even, are they? They're rejecting his father in heaven.

[25 : 54] You see, this is the diagnostic. How do you know at this point what the disciples think about Jesus? If you'd asked the disciples, hey, what do you think about Jesus? I'm sure they'd have had a great deal of respect for Jesus. They would have even told you, because Peter's already said, that he's the Messiah.

But the sign that they hadn't really understood yet, that they hadn't really empty-handedly accepted a place in the kingdom of God, was not what they said about Jesus, but how they treated the children who wanted to come to him.

Children, they're inclined to despise and overlook and think aren't worthy of Jesus' attention. See, here's the Mark 10 test to see whether you're a citizen of the kingdom of God, if you're really a Christian.

And notice, it's not what you say about Jesus, as important as that is. You know you're a Christian by how you treat other children of the kingdom.

The empty-handed, humble, nothing to claim for themselves, ones that our culture looks down on, how you treat them exposes what's going on in your heart.

[26 : 57] So much so, the story tells me this morning, that if I call myself a Christian, but I have no time for God's people, if I call myself a Christian, but I look down my nose at the members of the church, if I call myself a Christian, but I think, do you know what, how dull to be around God's people.

They're all a bunch of losers. Church is so terribly boring. I'd rather watch TV. I'd rather read a book. I'd rather even read my Bible than go to church and be around those people.

If you think like that, then Mark 10 suggests to you that you are not yet a Christian. You see, it's an obvious dynamic, isn't it?

You see it all over the place. Who are the best people at helping run support groups for alcoholics? People who've been alcoholics, right? Who are the best people at encouraging those with wayward children?

Those who've experienced wayward children. Who are the best at supporting those struggling with singleness or childishness or divorce or unemployment or grief or loss? Well, it's those who've experienced such things.

[28 : 01] And why is that the case? Why is it if you're experiencing one of those things, are you more likely to go to someone else who is struggling with those sorts of things or has struggled with those things? Why? Because you know they will not judge you.

That's why, isn't it? Because they will not look down their nose at you and say, I was never like that. And that's what's going on here, isn't it? The disciples reject the children.

They look down on them because they haven't yet accepted that that's exactly who they are spiritually. Oh, get those children away. Get those children away because they don't see that that's what they are like.

You see, if I look down my nose at the church, if I despise the gatherings of God's people, oh, that's really dull. Those people are really boring. They're all a bunch of losers. I don't want to be around them.

What am I saying? I haven't yet accepted that that's exactly who I am. I have nothing to claim of God. So if you refuse to accept the weakness of the people of the church, if you refuse to attend, if you think you can just sort of catch up online on a later date without the messiness of actually engaging with the real people in church, well, then it means you've not yet understood what it means to be a Christian.

[29 : 14] Let me try and pull all this together as we just conclude. A Christian is someone who is a citizen of the kingdom of God, someone who belongs through Jesus Christ.

You become a Christian by receiving it as a gift, not by anything that you do. And you know that you have accepted that gift by your attitude to other believers.

You don't look down your nose, but you recognize yourself as a sinner along with them who has an empty hand that has received everything they need from the Lord Jesus Christ. And the brilliance of this story is not only its usefulness in explaining the gospel to someone who's never heard it before, but it describes for us a dynamic with which we live our Christian lives.

There is a posture in Mark 10, a way of living, a way of being a Christian. That a Christian isn't someone who starts off by accepting that they're a little child and then grows up into thinking that they don't need anything anymore.

No, a Christian is someone who constantly recognizes their childlike status before a God of grace and mercy who gives them everything they need. And so if you're a Christian this morning, this story is to remind you that you are never more or never less than an empty-handed child who has received everything they need from the goodness and grace of God.

[30 : 30] So let's pray and give thanks. Loving Heavenly Father, we accept before you that we have nothing to claim, nothing to boast about, no goodness, no morality, no works, no actions, no deeds that are worthy of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of glory.

We deserve by nature to carry on in the kingdom of this world destined for hell and judgment. But we thank you and we receive with open, empty hands the gift of the Lord Jesus Christ, access to your kingdom through faith in him alone.

Please, Lord, we pray, help each of us personally in our own hearts to receive that great gift, to accept of ourselves what you say is true in your word and help us to demonstrate that we have received that by our attitudes to one another, that we wouldn't look down our nose at each other, that we wouldn't think we don't need one another, that we wouldn't think one another are dull and boring and not to be hung out with, but that we might love one another.

By this, all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. So help us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.