

# How Little Children Are Prevented From Coming to Christ.

by Edward Payson

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*Christ is displeased with those who prevent or discourage children from coming to him, and parents have a special responsibility to educate their children for the next world.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 18:6, Mark 10:14, Ephesians 6:4, 1 Timothy 4:12

**Topics:** "Child Evangelism", "Parental Responsibility"

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## Description

Edward Payson preaches about the importance of allowing children to come to Jesus, emphasizing that Christ is displeased with those who prevent or discourage children from approaching Him. He highlights the influence of adults on children's spiritual journey, stating that bad examples and neglectful attitudes can hinder children from seeking Christ. Payson urges parents and guardians to take their responsibility seriously, as the souls of children are precious and their upbringing in the ways of the Lord is crucial for their eternal destiny. He warns against the dangers of leading children astray through bad examples, neglecting their spiritual education, and discouraging them from seeking Christ.

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## Transcript

"But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God."

Matthew 10:14

the passage of which these words are a part, we have a beautiful instance of the fulfillment of an ancient prediction respecting Christ, that he should gather the lambs of his flock with his arms, and carry them in his bosom. It appears from the context that some persons, probably believing parents who had felt the efficacy of this blessing themselves, and who were anxious that their infant offspring should enjoy the same privilege, brought to him young children that he might touch them; or, as it is expressed by another Evangelist, that he might lay his hands on them and pray.

His disciples, who probably thought these children too young to derive any advantage from Christ, and were apprehensive that he would be interrupted and wearied with their applications, rebuked those who brought them. But our merciful Saviour, more compassionate and less concerned for his own comfort than his disciples, soon gave them to understand, that they must on no account discourage any, however

young, from approaching him. When Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God.

My friends, we here see a very unusual sight. We see the meek and lowly Jesus, not only displeased but much displeased; displeased too, not with his opposers or enemies, but with his own disciples. And what had they done to excite his displeasure? Had they been guilty of neglect, unkindness, or a criminal disregard to his comfort or convenience? No; had this been the case, he would have passed it over in silence, or have been the first to make an excuse for their conduct. But they discouraged little children from approaching him; and this was an offence which he could not suffer to pass unproved.

Since Christ is yesterday, today, and forever, the same, we may conclude that he still entertains similar feelings towards all who imitate the conduct of his disciples in this respect. From our text, therefore, we may fairly deduce the following proposition. Christ is much displeased with all who, in any way prevent or discourage little children from approaching him. With a view to illustrate and establish this proposition, I shall endeavor to show who are guilty of preventing or discouraging little children from coming to Christ; and why Christ is displeased with such persons.

I. Who are guilty of preventing or discouraging children from coming to Christ? I answer: Persons may be guilty of this sin either directly or indirectly. All are indirectly guilty of it, 1. Who do not come to Christ themselves, and publicly profess obedience to his authority. Man, my friends, is an imitative being. In children the propensity to imitate others is peculiarly strong. They come into the world ignorant and helpless, and naturally look to others for guidance, example, and instruction.

Their young and tender minds are ready to receive any impression, and take their complexion in a great degree from surrounding objects. What is done by those who are older, and who ought to be wiser than themselves, they are ready to conclude must be right. Instinctively grasping the first hand that is held out to them, they suffer themselves to be led along without knowing or asking whither they are to go. Did they, during their early years, see all around them flocking to Christ and yielding unreserved obedience to his commands; were they accustomed from infancy to hear his name frequently mentioned with reverence and affection, and his character described as the perfection of excellence and loveliness; they would, probably in most instances, be led by their imitative propensities under the guidance of the divine Spirit to give him the first place in their hearts, and choose him as their best friend.

But alas! how different is the scene which the world presents to their view. They see the great mass of those around them, neglecting and disobeying the Saviour of sinners; they seldom hear his name or that of their heavenly Father mentioned, but in a way of profanation; they see the broad road, of sinful conformity with the world, crowded with travelers eager in the pursuit of pleasure, wealth and honor; everything, which they see and hear, in short, tends to corrupt their unsuspecting minds, which are of themselves but too prone to choose and follow the downward path.

Supposing that what is so generally neglected can not be of much importance, and that, if they are no worse than those around them, their condition is safe, they eagerly plunge into the tumultuous current, and are rapidly swept away to perdition, with the careless multitude whose example they follow, unless divine grace, with resistless arm, snatches them from the gulf to which they are hastening, conveys them to the bosom of Christ, and plants their feet on the Rock of ages.

Such, my friends, are the pernicious effects of bad example on the youthful mind. Now every person, who does not come to Christ and publicly profess obedience to his authority, and conduct in a suitable manner,

helps to increase the number and strengthen the force of evil example. He pours the stream of his influence into the fatal torrent which is sweeping away the rising generation into the gulf of eternal ruin. He stands as a way-mark at the entrance of life, to direct infant travelers into the path of ruin.

Nor can any one excuse himself by pretending that his example has no influence. There is not, I venture to assert, a person in this assembly whose example does not, in a degree at least, influence the present conduct and future destiny of some young immortal; and if his example be not such as it ought to be, he indirectly prevents children from coming to Christ, and is answerable for all the consequences of his conduct. And if he be a parent, these observations apply to him with ten-fold force.

The influence of his example on the minds of his children will be almost omnipotent; we clearly see that nothing short of Omnipotence can prevent it from causing their destruction. A chain in the hand of a demon would not more irresistibly drag them to ruin than the example of an irreligious parent; for to his parents more than to all others, does a child look for direction. During the first years of life, while his character is forming, and most lasting impressions made, he considers their sayings as oracles, their word as law, and their opinions as the dictates of unerring wisdom, and their conduct as the pattern he is to imitate.

How powerfully then must the example of those parents, who neglect to come to Christ themselves, tend to prevent or discourage their children from approaching him: not to mention that by refusing to devote themselves to Christ, they put it out of their power to dedicate their children to him, and thus deprive them of all the blessings which would result from such a dedication made in the exercise of faith. 2. If those, who do not come to Christ, whose example is only negatively bad, are guilty of the sin mentioned in our text, much more are those guilty whose example is positively bad.

In this class are included all who profess wrong principles, or openly indulge in vicious practices. The open infidel who denies or calls in question the divine authority of revelation; the conceited infidel who ridicules or explains away the most important doctrines; the scoffer or profane swearer who familiarizes the infant ear to the language of impiety, and teaches the untutored tongue to utter it; the Sabbath breaker who tramples on the barrier with which God has encircled the sacred day; the liar or slanderer who by his example leads the young to trifle with truth and with the reputation of their fellow creatures; the slave to intemperance and sensuality who seduces them into the paths of dissipation and excess, are all, I will not say indirectly, but directly preventing the young from coming to Christ.

Every such character does much to bar up the way of life, is a stumbling block over which many will stumble, and fall to rise no more. And if he be one whose talents, wealth, learning, rank, or vivacity of manner gives him extensive influence in society, the pernicious effects of his example will be incalculable. Under his deadly shade no plants of purity will flourish, no flowers of virtue bloom. He breathes around contagion, pestilence and death, and while he sinks into the abyss of vice and infidelity, the whirlpool which he forms, will engulf everything that comes within the sphere of its action.

But if he be a parent what shall we say? If there be a sight on earth at which humanity must shudder, over which angels might weep, it is the sight of a young, a numerous family following with unsuspecting confidence a ruthless fiend, in the shape of a parent, who extends the hand of a guide only to lead them far from him who would gather them in his arms and carry them in his bosom; and betrays the helpless lambs to that roaring lion who goes about seeking whom he may devour. 3.

Those are indirectly guilty of preventing their children from coming to Christ, who employ no means to bring them to him, who are careful to educate them for this world but not for the next. That children are prone to imbibe the opinions and imitate the conduct of others, especially of their parents, has already been observed. Especially do they learn from them to estimate the value of different objects. What others neglect or despise, they consider as worthless; what others highly prize they esteem as valuable.

Hence if those who have the charge of their education treated them as they ought, if they appeared more solicitous for their souls than their bodies, for their spiritual and eternal, than their temporal interests; if they frequently mentioned Christ to them, as the pearl of great price, and spake of an interest in his favor as the one thing needful, compared with which every thing else is worthless, it is highly probable that, by the blessing of God, they might be early led to prize Christ in some measure as he deserves, and to feel unsafe and uneasy till an interest in his favor was obtained.

Agreeably, the Scriptures assure us that, if we train up a child in the way he should go, when he is old he will not depart from it. But if children perceive that their parents and others, who are entrusted with their education, are more solicitous to educate them for this world than for the next; more anxious for their present than their future welfare; more desirous to see them prosperous than pious; and more concerned for the health of their bodies than the salvation of their souls, they will inevitably be led to conclude that religion is of little consequence; that to come to Christ is needless; and that to obtain learning, riches, honor and applause, are the great objects for which men were created.

All parents therefore who thus educate their children for this world and not for the next, take the most effectual means to prevent them from coming to Christ, and to cultivate that worldly-mindedness which is directly opposed to the love of God. And, my friends, how great is the number who do this. How many even among the professed people of God are guilty in this respect. If it be true that a child, brought up in the right way, will never forsake it, few indeed are educated as they ought to be; for you need not be told that small is the number who follow the right way to the end of life.

My friends, did you take one half the pains, or display one half the concern to educate your children for God that you do for the world, you would most probably see them walking in the truth, and avoid the guilt which you now contract, of preventing their coming to Christ. Under this branch of my subject I may observe, that if parents feel unwilling or unable to instruct their children themselves, they ought at least to countenance and assist those who are willing to do it. Yet many will not even do this.

Most gladly, my friends, would we do all in our power to bring these lambs of the flock to Christ, and store their minds with religion's truth, would you give us an opportunity of doing it. That many do this we acknowledge with thankfulness and pleasure. But we are compelled to add, that many do not. No one can suppose that more than half the children of this society, who are of a suitable age, have at any time attended on those catachetical instructions which are communicated in this place after divine service.

Yet a very slight exertion of parental authority would secure their attendance. If this exertion is withheld, what must your children think? They see you sparing no pains or expense to give them that knowledge which is necessary for them in this world. They know that you require their attendance at school, and pay masters for instructing them. Yet when they have an opportunity of acquiring religious knowledge without expense, you do not require them to improve it. Must they not suppose that you view religious knowledge as a thing of no consequence; and religion itself as something which you do not wish them to acquire?

And does not this negligence powerfully tend to prevent them from coming to Christ? We would however indulge the hope, that when the return of a milder season shall permit us to resume our labors with the rising generation, we shall find that this negligence proceeded rather from inattention to the subject, than from a wish to deprive your children of religious instruction. 4. If those, who neglect to give their children a religious education, are guilty of indirectly preventing them from coming to Christ, much more so are they who give them an education which is positively bad, and which tends to foster and strengthen the evil propensities of their nature; propensities which must be eradicated before they can embrace the Saviour.

Yet such an education there is reason to fear that not a few parents give their children, though probably without intending it. How often, for instance, do parents encourage a spirit of revenge on their infant children by teaching them to strike any inanimate object which may have accidentally hurt them. How often do they speak of dress, ornaments, or personal beauty, in a way which is calculated to render children proud and vain of these frivolous and perishing distinctions!

How often do they, by praise injudiciously bestowed, foster a spirit of envy and false ambition, and encourage that emulation which the apostle expressly mentions among the works of the flesh. How often do they humor and indulge them in such a manner as is calculated to make them peevish and discontented through life, and to render their wills unmanageably stubborn and perverse. These are but a few of the evil propensities which the education, received by many children, tends to strengthen and increase.

Yet these propensities, are diametrically opposed to the religion of Christ, and tend to prevent children from embracing it. All therefore who foster and encourage them must be considered as guilty of the fault we have been describing. Still more forcibly do these observations apply to such as endeavor to discourage their children from attending to religion, lest it should render them melancholy or singular; or who speak of its friends and institutions, in their presence, with disrespect or contempt.

Children begin to listen to conversation and to receive impressions from it, at a much earlier age than is commonly supposed; and their first impressions are not only most easily made, but are generally most deep and lasting. Almost every seed, which is then sown in the mind, will take root and produce fruit in abundance through life and often through eternity. There have been many well authenticated instances in which the recollection, in after life, of some word or sentence, dropped by a pious parent, has proved the means of bringing persons, first to reflection, and finally to Christ; and hence we may conclude that at the judgment day, when the secrets of all hearts are laid open, it will appear that a jest, a sneer, or sarcastic observation, respecting the friends or institutions of religion, uttered in the presence of children, and recollected by them at some future day, has, in many instances, been the means of prejudicing them against it, and leading them far from Christ, from heaven and happiness.

The heathen philosophers had a maxim which was, "Great is the reverence due to children." The import and design of this maxim, as understood by them, was, that great care and attention should be shown in guarding against everything in our conduct and conversation, which tended to corrupt the infant or youthful mind. But if the heathen, who knew nothing of the worth or immortality of the soul, felt the necessity of adopting this maxim, how much more deeply should it be felt by us, to whom life and immortality are brought to light, and who are taught to know the unspeakable worth of the soul by the price which Christ paid for its redemption.

Having thus attempted to show who are guilty of preventing children from coming to Christ, I proceed to show, as was proposed, II. Why Christ is displeased. with such persons. 1. Christ is displeased with such as prevent children from approaching him, because in doing it they display a temper which he greatly dislikes, and which is diametrically opposite to his own. The temper of Christ is emphatically a temper of love for the souls of men and of compassion for sinners. Of the existence and strength of this temper he has given the strongest and most unequivocal proofs.

His object in coming into our world, the object of all his labors, of his sufferings and death, was to seek and to save those who are lost. But it is a long established maxim, that like rejoices in like. Christ, therefore, cannot but be pleased with those who discover a temper similar to his own; and unite their exertions with his in promoting the salvation of sinners. And on the contrary, he cannot but be displeased with such as possess a temper directly the reverse of his own, and exhibit no love or compassion for perishing immortal beings; no desire to bring them to the knowledge of him, who alone can give them salvation.

Still more must he be displeased with those who discourage or prevent any from approaching him; for this is the very temper of evil spirits whose whole desire and employment it is, to seduce men into the paths of sin, and prevent them from coming to the knowledge of Christ. 2. Christ is displeased with those who prevent or endeavor to discourage children from coming to him, because in so doing they oppose his will; and so far as they are able, frustrate his grand design, a design in which he feels most deeply interested.

It is his will that not one of these little ones should perish. It is his will that all men should come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved. It is his will that all men should be fellow workers with him in bringing about this great, and to him, most desirable event. To oppose the accomplishment of this event, therefore, is opposing his will. It is touching him on the most tender point. It is like touching the very apple of his eye. He can bear anything better than this.

When his disciples manifested the most inexcusable unbelief, he gently rebuked them. When they ungratefully slept instead of watching with him in his last agonies, he made an excuse for them. When Peter once and again denied that he knew him, he turned and brought him to repentance by a look. But when these very disciples discouraged parents from bringing to him their children he was much displeased. Nay more, when Peter endeavored to dissuade him from dying for sinners, he turned and said to him, get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offence to me.

These instances plainly show how deeply the heart of Christ is engaged and interested in the great work of saving sinners; and why nothing displeases him so much, as attempts to oppose or hinder its accomplishment. 3. Christ is angry with those who prevent children from approaching him, because it tends to rob him of a part of his reward. This reward principally consists in the pleasure of saving sinners. He participates largely in the joy which is felt in heaven when a sinner repents; and is especially pleased to see the young seek after him; to hear children crying, Hosanna to the Son of David.

No praises are more sweet to him than those which grace produces from the lips of babes. Whenever he hears and sees such things, he sees of the travail of his soul; he sees the fruit of his sufferings, and is satisfied. But those, who prevent or discourage children from approaching him, deprive him of this pleasure, rob him of a part of his reward, and of course excite his displeasure. 4. Christ is displeased with those who are guilty of this conduct, because it evinces a disregard and contempt of those blessings which he died to purchase.

Those who discourage others from approaching him, cannot of course believe in him themselves, and the language of their conduct is, an interest in Christ is of no consequence to us, or our children. Temporal prosperity and the favor of the world are much more important; and if our children can but succeed here, we care not what becomes of them hereafter. That Christ is displeased with those who thus disbelieve him, is evident from his conduct while here on earth. We are informed that he looked round about upon his unbelieving hearers, with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts.

As he is yesterday, today, and forever, the same, he must still feel similar emotions, and is doubtless now looking round with a mixture of grief and anger on those, in this assembly, who do not cordially believe in him themselves, and feel anxious that the rising generation should embrace him. IMPROVEMENT.

1. This subject may be improved for the purpose of self-examination. For this purpose permit me to ask, my hearers, whether any of you are guilty, either directly or indirectly, by your example, conduct or conversation, of discouraging children from coming to Christ, or of preventing others from bringing them to him. To assist you in answering this question, permit me to remind you, that in this, as in other respects, he that is not with Christ is against him. Your example must be either positively good, or positively bad; and everyone, who does not encourage children in coming to Christ, is guilty of indirectly preventing it; and his negligence leads them to suppose that to come is of no consequence.

They will generally be more influenced by your example than by the precepts of Christ; and if your example is not good, if you do not enter the way of life yourselves, and invite them to follow, you do in effect prevent them from entering it. To illustrate these remarks, permit me to mention a story, Mr. Baxter relates, of a shepherd driving his flock over a high and narrow bridge, built across a torrent. The foremost of the flock, terrified by some accidental occurrence, leaped over the bridge into the flood below; the others, not seeing the danger into which their leaders had fallen, and supposing they might safely follow them, leaped after them, one by one, till all were destroyed.

In a similar manner, I suppose, generations of mankind perish. We have all, says the prophet; gone astray like sheep, and turned every one to his own way. The end of this way is destruction. Into this destruction all past sinners, who died impenitent, have already fallen. But we see not the gulf into which they have plunged; and, like the foolish sheep, pursue with headlong impetuosity the same road. Our children, supposing that they may safely follow, where we lead the way, rush after us, and find too late we have guided them to their ruin: while their children in turn; unless grace prevent, will follow them in like manner to perdition.

Thus like a river whose waters are successively swallowed up in the ocean, one generation of men after another, is led on blindfold by the influence of example, and plunged into the gulf which has no bottom. Need anything more be said to show the infinite importance of setting a good example before our children, and leading them after us in the path of life. 2. From this subject parents and others, to whom the care of young immortals is entrusted, may learn the awful responsibility which rests upon them.

Were the guidance and direction of one, two, or more worlds entrusted to you, my friends, would you not feel that yours was a most important and awfully responsible situation? My friends, if you are parents, something infinitely more important than worlds is committed to your care. You have the charge of immortal souls; souls, which our Saviour has taught us are each of them worth more than whole worlds. This charge is committed to you, that you may bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

And God considers you as answerable for the performance of this duty, and in some measure for the salvation of your children. At least he will consider you as answerable, for their destruction, should they perish, unless you do all in your power to prevent it. If you doubt this, hear what he says to his ministers, Son of man I have made thee a watchman hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, he shall die in his iniquity, but his blood will I require at thy hand.

But, my friends, parents are at least as much appointed by God to be watchmen over their children, as ministers are to be watchmen over their people. Therefore if parents prove unfaithful; the blood of their children will be required at their hands. If any still doubt, let them hear what God says to his ancient people, who permitted and by example taught their children to worship idols. Thou hast taken, says he, my sons and my daughters whom thou hast borne unto me, and hast sacrificed them unto idols; and is this a small matter, that thou hast slain my children?

Also in thy skirts is found the blood of the poor innocents; I have not found it by secret search, but upon them all. My friends, how much reason have many parents to cry, Deliver us from blood guiltiness. How dreadfully is our whole land stained and polluted by their blood, and how loudly does it call for vengeance! I am more and more persuaded, that neglecting the religious education of children is one of the most crying sins of which we are guilty as a people. If any doubt this, let him recollect the passage already quoted, Train up a child in the way he should go, and he will not depart from it.

My friends, these are the words of God, of the God of truth. Look round and see how few are walking in the right way; hence learn how few have been brought up in the way they should go. Are there any of your children who do not walk in the way they should go? It must be because they have not been properly educated, and the blessing of God not sufficiently prayed for. And it is perhaps impossible for anyone, who is not a real consistent Christian, to educate children properly.

None but such can truly dedicate their children to God. None but such can sincerely pray for, or obtain from Christ that wisdom and grace, which are necessary to bring them up for God; and none but such can expect a blessing to follow their exertions. You can readily see that an unbelieving, impenitent man is not qualified to be a minister of Christ, to guide immortal souls to heaven. How then can an impenitent, unbelieving parent bring up his children as he ought, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?

My friends, what a powerful motive does this afford to induce you to become the real disciples of Christ. Not only your own salvation, but very probably that of your children, depends upon it. If then you love them, if you love yourselves, if you would not sink under the weight of their blood, and hear them cursing you forever, as the authors of their ruin, be persuaded without delay to come to Christ, to bring them with you, to bind yourselves and them to him in an everlasting covenant.

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