

Matthew 21:12-17

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 November 2013

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Today, as we've already made, I think, very clear in one way or another, we are celebrating the place of children and infants in the church, in God's covenant community. Now, we'll do so very especially as we participate in the sacrament of baptism. In baptizing those we will baptize, we are recognizing and declaring that they belong to God, that Elspeth and Madeline belong to God, that they are members of God's family, of God's covenant people. Now, as we declare that, if you're maybe pondering, well, what is being said there? You might, and some would protest, or if not protest, genuinely question such confidence. How can we declare so confidently that these wee ones are indeed members of God's family? Some might say, not in any unpleasant way, but might say, but they're just children. They're just babies. How can we know if they do or do not belong to God's family? Now, in the passage that we read in Matthew, we witness the chief priests and the teachers of the law perturbed by the presence of children in the temple. The temple, so they thought, was no place for bawling bairns, disturbing the peace. They would have Jesus rebuke the children, or certainly shut them up, or remove them from that place. But what does Jesus do? Well, we've noticed it very briefly already, and even as we've read the passage. What Jesus does is He rebukes the religious people. He rebukes the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and He does so by quoting the words of Psalm 8 and verse 2. From the lips of children and infants, you, that is God, have ordained, or purposed, praise. And it is to these words that we want to turn this morning. The text that we have before us is that one verse in Psalm 8, the verse quoted by Jesus. But as we consider that verse, and as our focus is on that verse, we will make some reference to the rest of the psalm, and indeed, to the occasion when Jesus quotes this verse recorded for us there in Matthew's gospel.

We want to consider what the psalm and Jesus have to say about children praising God, about kids' praise, you might say. And we'll do so under two headings, two very simple headings that I think, I hope I'll be able to establish and reflect what we have in the text, and particularly the text in the context of the psalm, first of all, our first heading is simply this, children praise God. That's what verse 2 states, children praise God. But the second thing that maybe isn't so immediately obvious is this, that children lead us to praise God. And I would suggest that that is why verse 2 is in the psalm. So, what verse 2 states is that children praise God. And the reason that it is in the psalm at all is because it is explaining to us or presenting to us how children lead us to praise God. Now, I hope when we turn to that, which isn't so immediately obvious, I'll be able to explain what I mean by that.

But first of all, children praise God. Now, the psalmist does more than simply describe the reality of children and infants praising God. He does that. He states that this is what happens. It's worth just mentioning in the passing as a bit of background as we use the language of the psalm and the language of Jesus that He quotes from the psalm, that this terminology or this language of children and infants, and the Hebrew original that is translated in this way, children and infants, is used often in the Bible as a collective term to describe children of all ages, from very, very young, indeed from the newly born through to older children, a collective term that describes all children. It's good to just have that in the back of our minds. And what verse 2 is doing is not simply describing that children of all ages praise God. It's doing that. He also tells us, the psalm also tells us, why children and infants praise God. Why do they do that? Well, what does the verse say? From the lips of children and infants, you, the psalmist is addressing God, you have ordained praise. The reason why children praise God is because God has ordained. God has determined, God has purposed that they would do so. That is the reason why they do so. Children and infants praise God because it is God's purpose that they do so. And I want to explore this matter, this reality, this affirmation of the psalm of God's purpose for children, looking at both His stated purpose in this verse, but also

considering God's broader purpose that I think is implied by this verse. So, we're going to think about this reality that children praise God. We're focusing in on the fact that the reason they do so is because that is what God has determined. That's what God has purposed. And as we think about God's purpose, we want to just notice God's stated purpose there in the verse, and then His broader purpose implied by the verse. First of all, then, God's stated purpose. And there we're going to pose two questions. What is it, and what does it achieve? What is God's stated purpose? Well, it's very clear, I think, clear enough there in verse 2. It is God's stated purpose that children and infants should praise God. From the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise. I think that is simple enough. But you'll notice, if you're looking carefully at the psalm, you'll notice that in the footnote at the bottom of the page there in your Bible, an alternative translation is offered to the word praise. They're in verse 2. And the alternative translation that is offered is the word strength. So, you have these alternatives. The original word that the psalmist used can be translated in these two ways. Now, that seems a little odd to us because they seem quite different words, praise and strength. The actual word that is used in the original Hebrew is more naturally translated as strength. Well, what is it to be? Well, I think we can legitimately conclude that both praise and strength are legitimate translations, and certainly both are true. The usual preference for praise, as we have it in our version—it's not the case in all versions of the Bible—is grounded in the fact that Jesus in the temple quotes from the Septuagint. That is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was available at the time that Jesus ministered here on earth. And He ordinarily quotes from that Greek translation for ease of understanding with those He was speaking to. And in that translation, the Greek word used is the word that means praise. So, in a way, that's made its way backwards into the manner in which this psalm is translated. Now, it's also true that the word praise fits more easily with lips. We read, from the lips of children and infants you have ordained, you know, the word praise seems a more likely word than the word strength. You know, lips pronounce praise. We can visualize that. That makes sense. Whereas lips proclaim strength isn't so immediately obvious what that would mean.

[9 : 08] So, praise is entirely legitimate and entirely true of what is being said here. But having said that, and we'll get through this quickly, but I just want to clarify this because I think it is helpful if we just focus on the two words and how they work together in a sense. We ought not to lose sight of the original Hebrew and the declaration by the psalmist that God ordains strength from the lips of children and infants. And by holding the two meanings together of the word praise and strength, I think we discover something very powerful. And I would suggest that it is this. God not only ordains praise from the lips of children, He not only recognizes and receives such praise from the lips of children, He goes further. God has purposed that such praise from the lips of children and infants is endowed with spiritual strength and power. The praise of children is not just cute and cuddly. It's strong and powerful. This is what is being said here. Yes, it's nice, isn't it, to have the children gathered together and maybe in a family service they sing something they've been learning at Sundays and we say, isn't that nice? Of course it is nice and we enjoy it. But it's much more than just nice.

In God's purposes it is strength, spiritual strength. It is a powerful communication of praise that has an impact, as we'll see in a moment, in God's purposes. But what does the psalmist mean by that? What does he mean by saying that from the lips of infants and children God has ordained strength? What does the praise of children achieve? That was the second question that we said we'd look at as we're considering God's stated purpose. The children and infants, from their lips, should come praise. What does it achieve? Well, again, we turn to our text and we have the answer to the question. From the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise, and then what does the psalmist go on to say? Because of your enemies to silence the foe and the avenger. The praise or the strength of children is used by God to silence His foes. The praise of children is used by God to extend His kingdom where the silencing of God's enemies will, as God determines, often involve converting them from enemies into friends. When we think of this for today, when we think of God's enemies and God's purposes towards His enemies, we know that God would have all men repent. And so, when we speak of the silencing of God's enemies, we shouldn't see it entirely as something where they remain silent, but we can see it in terms of them being silenced from speaking against God and, as God purposes, being brought to praise God. And what is it that can be used to bring this about? Well, the psalmist tells us from the lips of children and infants, their praise, the spiritual power that there is in what they say as they praise God, can be used of God to silence God's

enemies. And I would suggest also draw some of them, as God determines, into the circle of His own friends. Now, as we just ponder on that for a moment, this is quite remarkable stuff. When we think of the enemies of the gospel in all their power and influence and eloquence, or perhaps just in their apathy and indifference, we as believers can sometimes feel small and weak and incapable as we would want to respond to them. And yet, what does

God assure us in this verse? Well, He assures us that in His hands praise from the lips of children and infants. The infantile praise of toddlers, the childish testimony of children are powerful weapons in God's armory to silence, perhaps sometimes to soften His foes and to win His battles.

Now, even with that explanation or partial explanation, you might say, well, this all sounds stirring, but how does this work in the real world? Well, let me tell you a couple of stories that maybe illustrate how this can work in the real world. I want to tell you a true story about a wee boy called Tommy. Now, Tommy is no longer a wee boy. He's a big grown-up man, but he was a wee boy once. And Tommy went to the school where I went when I was a child in Lima in Peru, Colegio San Andres. Some of you have heard of it over the years. Now, in Tommy's home, they didn't praise God. They were a nice family, a good, decent family, but they didn't praise God. They weren't a Christian family, but they thought the school was good. So, Tommy was sent to the school. Now, what happened at the school? Well, at the school, he was taught to praise God. He was taught to pray before he ate his snack at lunchtime.

[14 : 40] And we, Tommy, headed home one day, and as the family were about to have their meal and to get tucked into this lovely meal that was in front of them, Tommy piped up and said, Daddy, we haven't said thank you to God. And Daddy looked at Mommy and a little bit shuggled and shifted and said, Oh, okay, what do we do here? And what else was not to kind of upset the wee boy and to just be consistent with what they were teaching him at school? They said, Okay, we'll say something. And, oh, they had a wee prayer. Now, to cut a long story short, that was the means that God used for those parents to think about matters of eternity, matters of their soul, of their relationship to God, and they were brought to faith in Jesus Christ. From the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise. Or let me tell you another story I heard. Now, I don't know this wee girl. I was told about her, but I was told certainly it's something that happened. It's true.

I know Tommy. Tommy is a surgeon in the States now. Anyway, in fact, you know who he is, or you know he's the brother-in-law. For those of you who know Angus Lament, he's Angus Lament's brother-in-law.

Forgive me for those who don't know that personal reference, but for some of you that will be meaningful. But let me move on to the wee girl that I was told about. This is a wee girl who headed back home from church one day, and as she was walking into her house in the front garden next to her, her neighbor's front garden, her neighbor, who was a very nice man, was busy working in the garden.

I don't know if he was mowing the lawn or what it was he was doing, and I'm not objecting to that, let me stress. But as it happens, that's what he was doing. He was in the garden doing what what you do in the garden. Clearly, he hadn't been to church that morning. And the wee girl, in the innocence of a wee girl, said to the neighbor, or rather, I think it was the neighbor who asked her, so where are you coming from? And she said, well, I'm coming from church.

And she said, did you go to church? And he said, no, I don't go to church. And she said, why don't you go to church? He says, well, I don't believe in God. And the wee girl said to him, well, that's just silly. Well, that's just silly. You know, and we laugh, and of course we laugh, because it is, it's something that we can. It draws a smile to us.

[16 : 54] But is that not something of what the psalmist is declaring here, that from the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise, that when that man, hardened in his unbelief, perhaps would have been spoken to by another adult with great arguments and wonderful books that had been read and laying it on, no impact. But when the wee girl says to him, that's just silly, I don't know what the impact was. But are those not the kind of words from the lips of children that can be used by God? And maybe we could multiply the examples, but perhaps the best illustration of what the psalm is affirming is what we have recorded for us in Matthew chapter 21.

You see, in Matthew chapter 21, we have an example of what the psalm means that is rock solid in terms of being sure that this is indeed what the psalmist intended, because Jesus Himself takes that verse and applies it to what has just happened to Him there in the temple.

So, let's just for a moment think about this example that we have in Scripture itself. There's so much that could be said, but we're going to limit ourselves quite strictly, or I'm intending to limit myself quite strictly in terms of what I say. There's a really quite intriguing contrast that is painted between the children who shout praise to God, Hosanna to the Son of David, and the religious leaders. And the contrast is at different levels, but the level I want to focus on is the fact that both, both of these groups, the children and the religious leaders, both saw the same thing. Notice there in verse 15 of chapter 21 of Matthew we read, So, on the one hand, you have the children, and they see the wonderful things that Jesus is doing, how the blind and the lame came to Him, and they were healed. They see this. They also see, I imagine, how He overturned the tables of the money changers. They see all this. That's what they see. That's the evidence, if you wish, that they have to respond to. And the chief priests and the teachers of the law, they see exactly the same. And they also can determine and conclude that what He is doing are wonderful things. The lame are healed. The blind can see. These are wonderful things.

By anybody's estimation, they see the same thing. And yet, and yet, their response is so indifferent. The children shout, Hosanna to the Son of David, while the chief priests and the teachers of the law grumble with hateful indignation. And the children praise God, and as they do, they silence the enemies of God. And I wonder, did the children know what they were doing?

[20 : 07] Did they know that they were silencing God's enemies by their praise? Did they even understand fully the words that they were pronouncing? Did they recognize the one they were praising?

I think we need to respond, very possibly not, on all three counts. They didn't know what they were doing. They didn't understand fully the words that they were proclaiming. They didn't recognize the one they were addressing. And yet, they were praising God.

And we have this on good authority. We're not giving them the benefit of the doubt. We have this on good authority, the authority of Jesus Himself, who identifies the praise of the children directed to Him, or certainly in response to what He is doing, as the very praise ordained by God for God, spoken of in Psalm 8 and verse 2 that we're thinking about this morning. God's stated purpose, then, as declared in verse 2 of this psalm, is that children and infants might praise Him, and in so doing participate in the silencing of God's enemies and the extension of God's kingdom.

But I also suggested that there is in this verse, or implied in this verse, a broader purpose, the stated purpose, children praising God, but also a broader purpose. And we'll think about this much more briefly. We want to suggest a broader or deeper purpose that God has fought His children with the stress on the word His, for His children. And I suppose the question that really I want us to give some thought to as we think we're back in Psalm 8 is, who are the children and infants referred to in verse 2? From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise. Are they, in the words of the chorus, all the children of the world? When the psalmist goes on to speak of man in this psalm, and we're not going to look at what he says about man, but in this psalm he goes on to speak of man.

What is man? And then he speaks of man's dignity and of the place of honor that God has granted to man. And that's not our concern this morning. But when the psalmist goes on to do that, he is clearly speaking of all men and women. He's speaking of the human race. He's speaking of mankind. All men enjoy the honor and the dignity with which they are described in this psalm.

[22 : 47] Should we draw from that that when he speaks of children and infants, he's also speaking of all children and infants without exception. I don't think we could come to that conclusion. It wouldn't make sense to come to that conclusion because in the very psalm these children and infants are spoken of in distinction from and indeed in opposition to God's enemies, whom we're told they silence.

The children from whose lips God ordains praise are, they must be, God's own children, children, the children who are part of his covenant community. True praise, and clearly this is true, acceptable praise, can only come from redeemed lips. The children are God's children. They are God's covenant children, be that by the privilege of birth into the covenant community or by the privilege of being engrafted into God's covenant community. Whatever the means of entry, these are God's children. They are his, and as his, they sing his praise. This is what we might call God's broader or deeper purpose, to have children as part of his family and that his children should sing his praise.

We baptize Elspeth and Madeline this morning because we believe that they are his children, and we believe that God has ordained that from their lips praise will and indeed does already flow. So children, praise God, but also, and more briefly, the second aspect of this. Children, lead us to praise God. I said there were two main headings, and the second one will be a lot less than this first one. The first one was, children, praise God. What the verse states.

But secondly, children, lead us to praise God, or we might say why the verse is in the psalm. We need to have an idea of the shape of the psalm. The psalm begins and ends with exultant praise directed to God. The same words, bookend the psalm, sandwich the psalm. Verse 1, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. And the psalmist ends in verse 9, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. The psalm begins and ends in that same way. And in the middle, the psalmist identifies two realities that lead us to praise God, that draw us to declare what the psalmist declares at the beginning and at the end of the psalm. What are these two realities? Well, what we've been thinking about this morning, the spiritual power invested in the praise of children. And then secondly, what we haven't thought about this morning, the dignity of man. These things draw from us praise for God. Both realities, as we consider them, draws the believer to stand in awestruck wonder at the genius and the grace of God.

[25 : 58] Our God is the God who, though He holds all power in His hands, chooses to use the praise of children to fulfill His purposes and silence His enemies. And is this not the spiritual principle that Paul reminds us of in his first letter to the Corinthians? We can just read what Paul says there from verse 25 as we draw things to a close. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. And Paul goes on. This is God's way.

We can, and we sometimes are, discouraged as we witness the enemies of God seeming to trample Him, and His Word, and His Word, and His people underfoot. Maybe even this week, as we've been the witnesses of what our Parliament has been busy doing. We can be discouraged by what we see, and yet we would be reminded, and God reminds us in this psalm, that even though our voice may appear often timorous and tentative, ridiculed or simply ignored, yet there is hope as we cast our eyes and fix our eyes on our God. For in God's purposes, praise from the lips of one, just one child can silence the most virulent and vociferous enemy of God, or soften the hardest heart. And so, we need not be discouraged as we see God raising up amongst us children and infants who can praise His name, and as they do, their praise would be used of God to silence His enemies and soften their hearts.

God grant that it would be so, and as we recognize that it is so, let us with the psalmist declare, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we pray that we would indeed be drawn by this truth to praise You in the manner that the psalmist does so, that we would direct our words of praise. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth, that we would stand dumbfounded and awestruck at Your genius and at Your grace and at Your glory. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.