

JESUS AND THE LITTLE CHILDREN

Matthew 19:13-15

Contemporary English
Version (CEV)

13 Some people brought their children to Jesus, so that he could place his hands on them and pray for them. His disciples told the people to stop bothering him. 14 But Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and don't try to stop them! People who are like these children belong to God's kingdom." [a] 15 After Jesus had placed his hands on the children, he left.

THREE WORLDS OF THIS TEXT

WORLD BEHIND THE TEXT.

From the earliest days Matthew's gospel has been recognized as the "Jewish gospel," the one most reflective of Christianity's Jewish background. The gospel of Matthew has been written by a third-generation Christian in the closing decades of the first century C.E. the place of composition was probably somewhere in Syria, perhaps in the great city of Antioch, but certainly somewhere where there was opportunity for both continuing interaction with Jewish synagogues and contact of a missionary nature with the surrounding non-Jewish world. Matthew's account of Jesus is shot through with a vision of faith. ⁱ

It is commonly suggested that this gospel was written for a Jewish audience that has been persuaded that Jesus is God's Messiah. This gospel places emphasis on Jesus as fulfilling the Torah, and the omission of Mark's explanation of Jewish customs supports this. ⁱⁱ

The backdrop for Jesus' teaching and practice in this text is the disciples' rebuke of those who were bringing the children, and the disciples' attempt to hinder them. Jesus forcefully overrides the disciples' intervention. He becomes indignant – which suggests the seriousness of excluding children from the blessings of God. Jesus takes a typical Jewish formula about what was necessary for entering the reign of God and turns it on its head by stating not what *works of the Law* are required for entrance, rather, "whoever does not receive the reign of God as a *child* will never enter it." Since children were not even required to keep Law, much less did they actually fulfill it, Jesus can be taken to challenge the perception that adults who are under obligation to the law, and do fulfill it, are thereby qualified to enter the reign of God.



WORLD OF THE TEXT

Following Jesus' fourth major teaching block (chapter 18), Matthew provides his usual formula to transition to a narrative section.

Matthew 19:13

the disciples rebuked them.

In spite of Jesus' earlier words to the disciples about welcoming children (18:5), the disciples rebuke those who would bring children to Jesus for prayer. Children, as those who with less status than adults in the first – century world, are of great importance to Jesus, as he demonstrates in his correction of the disciples (19:14)

In the previous verses on marriage, divorce and celibacy – the 'family' theme proceeds, quite naturally, to that of children (vv13-15). In 18:2-4 Jesus had taken a child and made that little one a symbol of the humility that should prevail in the community of the kingdom. Now when children are brought to him he no longer speaks of them symbolically but, in the face of contrary inclinations from the disciples (v. 13b), insists that children have a central place in the community's life and worship. From the children in their midst adult members of the community have much to learn about the true nature of the kingdom and the dispositions required to receive it (v 14b). Jesus seals his words by performing the action his disciples had tried to prevent: he lays his hands on the children before going on his way (v. 15).ⁱⁱⁱ

19:14 *the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*

This language evokes Jesus' earlier words and actions at 18:1-5, in which he makes a child an example for entering the kingdom. There he uses the lowly status of a child to correct the disciples' concern over who would be greatest in the kingdom.

THE WORLD IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

Key themes of Matthew 19:1-26

- Jesus is the true interpreter of the Torah regarding divorce.
- In the kingdom, those deemed of lower status (women, children, the Poor) are highly valued.
- Status inversion characterizes the kingdom
- God is able to save any and all people.

Matthew indicates that Jesus embodies and teaches that his followers should not be preoccupied with status concerns, since the kingdom is not about status but about service.



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Throughout this section of Matthew the disciples have been portrayed as being preoccupied with status in God's coming kingdom and their own place in it. In contrast, Jesus teaching on the kingdom have both hinted and highlighted that God's reign will be characterized by concern for those with lower status, such as children, 'little ones,' women and the poor. Jesus points to children as examples for the disciples to emulate. In the first century Greco-Roman world, with its clear levels of status and codes of honour for relationships, Jesus' teachings offer a different view of reality. The kingdom is not defined by status categories.^{iv}

In his book *Too Small to ignore: Why the Least of these matters Most*, Wess Stafford argues convincingly that we are called to invest heavily in children as prime examples of the 'least of these'. As the president of Compassion International, Stafford advocated for children in poverty, and his book contains numerous examples of what true compassion for children looks like. This might be an opportunity for you to consider supporting a child through a charity organization.

Most churches have both explicit and implicit images depicting children. Sometimes the images conflict without our realizing it, and this confusion may scupper attempts to get grips with children's spirituality. Why not explore this in your context? For instance, where are the images of children seen in your church and what kind of images are they? Maybe there are children in the stained glass windows or other church artwork. What impression of childhood do these capture – vulnerable, loving, dependent, idealize? Are only adults represented in the imagery? There are also images in words, and sometimes actions, of our worship. At what point are real children 'visual images'? what images come across? Perhaps it's the image of children escaping to their groups like animals released from a cage. Or as gift bearers during the offertory. Or as entertainers of alight relief I the 'show and tell' after the serious part of the mass. Or relegated to the back pews or area out of sight where it doesn't matter what they do. Are they allowed to sit together in one place, perhaps at the front, or does this feel more of a requirement? Whose benefit is that really for?

Becoming more aware of the messages about children provided in church and Christian imagery is an important step towards supporting children's spirituality. Sometimes what we are trying to say in words and policies is at odds with our imagery, and that makes change difficult. For example, taking the spiritual voice of the child more seriously could be harder where most of the imagery of childhood is of the helpless, sleeping baby Jesus. Or it may be difficult to sustain as sense that



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children's spirituality also has things to offer the wider community when most of the imagery portrays children as 'takers or 'in need'. To do justice to children's spiritual lives, we need to be more aware of our imagery and to see it as a powerful way in which to engage with issues of paradox and complexity. Images can be a good way of counteracting simplistic thinking.

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- ⁱ Brendan Byrne. *Lifting the Burden Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*. (Strathfield, NSW. St Paul's Publications. 2004) x-xi
- ⁱⁱ Jeannine K. Brown *Teach the Text Commentary Series Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan. Baker Books. 2015) 4.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Byrne. *Lifting the Burden*. 149.
- ^{iv} Brown. *Matthew*. 223-224



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