

Children: Gift and Model

Devotional Reading: Psalm 8

Background Scripture: Matthew 18:1–6; Mark 9:36–37, 42; 10:13–16;
Luke 2:1–20

Today's Scripture: Mark 9:36–37, 42; Mark 10:13–16

I. Jesus and a Child

Mark 9:36–37, 42

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “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.”

⁴² “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

Today's passage begins with the disciples settling into their lodging for the night. As they do so, Jesus confronts them, asking about a dispute. The disciples are ashamed and do not answer. But of course, Jesus knows their argument was about status (Mark 9:33–34). Jesus replies to their concealed debate by teaching that those who want to be first must be last and servants of all (9:35). Then Jesus proceeds to teach through a practical demonstration.

36. Jesus begins his illustration by bringing a *child* into the room and situating him where all 12 disciples can see. Jesus' unusual actions do not stop there. He proceeds to embrace the child as a

father would, a detail not mentioned in the parallel texts of Matthew 18:2 and Luke 9:47. Jesus physically models the verbal point he is about to make, teaching through “an enacted parable.”

37a. This verse is essential for understanding true discipleship. There is a relationship between how believers see people, accept and serve them, and the welcoming of Jesus himself.

The 12 disciples and Jesus are most likely conversing in Aramaic, the everyday conversational language of first-century Jews and a later version of Hebrew. In Aramaic, the word for “child” is the same as the word for “servant.” Therefore, Jesus' illustration points toward acceptance of the young, child-like, and lowly in social status.

Jesus begins two sequences with this verse. One has a positive outcome, and the other has a negative result. The positive sequence begins with those willing to receive both Jesus and children. As Jesus adds words to his provocative gesture, he calls on his *name*, expressing his authority as king. What Jesus offers here is not a general maxim of life apart from any other belief or truth. Instead, he specifically connects a particular outlook on life to following him. When one submits to Jesus as Lord, there is an expectation of inclusion, unity, and a warm welcome

for all. Jesus is doing something beyond merely affirming the humane impulse to honor children. He is redefining fundamental values essential to life in God's kingdom. Because Jesus is King, his followers must pursue a new way of thinking and acting that points away from status-seeking and toward radical inclusion of all people regardless of rank.

37b. The positive sequence continues. To *welcome* Jesus is to receive the one who *sent* him—the heavenly Father. Jesus' words expand the disciples' view in a sort of chain reaction. When believers welcome the poor and humble, they act in warm hospitality toward the Lord himself. When they embrace Jesus, they mysteriously also receive the Father. Equating the receipt of Jesus with receiving the one who sent him reflects a shared purpose of the Father and Son. The three distinct persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are one in divine nature and exist together in constant relationship with mutual submission. Truly, there is no greater glory than theirs!

42. This section moves into the negative sequence. As Jesus holds the child in his arms, he pronounces a dire warning. Those who cause the small, weak, or vulnerable to get tripped up spiritually face severe judgment. The Greek word translated *stumble* in this verse holds connotations of entrapment. In other contexts, it refers to interfering with faith in Jesus, prompting someone to give up on faith, or causing a person to sin (Romans 14:13–21; 1 Corinthians 8:13). The word is repeated several times in the verses following this one to emphasize how important it is to remove roadblocks from the path of faith (Mark 9:43, 45, 47). It warns the disciples to keep the way to Jesus clear.

A more significant issue to which this verse is attached is Jesus' aim at peaceful camaraderie in shared ministry. We recall

that the specific concern running through the conversation is an incorrect focus upon power and status that leads to argument and posturing (Mark 9:33–34). All those turning to Jesus, speaking out in his name, and serving for his sake are not to be hindered or rejected. He calls for a straight and open path to him for all who desire to come.

Jesus compares blocking someone's approach to him with having a *millstone* hung around one's *neck*. This shocking illustration depicts weighty judgment. By its very nature, the image causes us to stop and consider the consequences of our actions. A millstone is a large, round stone disk on which grain is ground into flour. It has a hole carved in the center so that it may be rotated upon a stationary stone underneath. This allows the grain between the stones to be crushed and ground.

A millstone represents a weight far more than any human can hope to carry. To be *thrown into the sea* with a millstone around one's neck means certain death by drowning. By most estimations, not many things are worse than this consequence, yet Jesus states this idea is *better* than being a stumbling block!

II. Disciples and Children

Mark 10:13–16

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

13. When we read that Jesus' *disciples*

rebuked those who brought him *children* for blessing, we may wonder whether the word *disciples* refers only to the original Twelve or if it includes others who also travel with Jesus. The New Testament uses the word *disciples* both ways. The distinction is evident in places where the Twelve are designated as “apostles.” Mark 10:32 uses the term “they” for 3 different groups: “the disciples,” those “who followed,” and “the Twelve.”

The Greek term utilized here for the word *children* often refers to pre-teens, anyone who has not yet entered puberty. No matter the age of their children, parents naturally want God’s best for them. So, parents approach Jesus and the Twelve, asking that Jesus touch their children. The action reminds us of kingly and rabbinical blessings where the leader places his hands on the child’s head and speaks a benediction.

14. Jesus was likely just a short distance away and saw everything. The text describes Jesus’ reaction as much displeased, *indignant*, or angry. Jesus is irritated at an attitude that seems to value one person over another. Jesus wants his disciples to see that the wrong priorities work against the values of *the kingdom of God*.

The disciples find themselves countermanded. Jesus’ chastisement is sharp. He expresses the correction both positively and negatively for emphasis. Positively, he instructs the disciples to *let the children come* to him. The term *let* here means to “allow.” Then he says, *do not hinder them*. This saying is framed negatively: do not keep these children away—because *the kingdom* belongs to them.

Why does God’s kingdom belong to people who are like children? Because those who bring no status or standing as they come to God are ready to receive his kingdom as a gift. In vulnerability,

they come to their provider with open hands and hearts.

15. Jesus asks his disciples to pay close attention: Entrance into *the kingdom of God* is not granted through power and prestige but rather by becoming *like a child* in some sense. Worldly perspectives place a premium on earning things. Children are unable to do much of that, but they are good at receiving gifts! Child-like delight, gratitude, and open arms are some attitudes to have when receiving the kingdom of God.

Thus, Jesus continues to shift the disciples’ conceptualization of status, procurement, and belonging. Jesus speaks the phrase *the kingdom of God* 14 times in the Gospel of Mark. The repetition indicates its importance. In this instance, Jesus teaches that no one can do God favors in exchange for entry into his place of dominion. Instead, we all must come like vulnerable, humble children who need provision. Those clinging to the illusion of their own status will not enter God’s kingdom. But those who receive the kingdom as a gift will enter it by Jesus’ compassionate grace.

16. The discourse ends with Jesus repeating his point yet again through action. As he did in Mark 9:36, Jesus takes the children into his *arms*. His embrace both blesses them and powerfully communicates complete inclusion and love. The act of blessing by the laying on of hands began way back in Genesis with Israel’s ancestors. Consider the words of Numbers 6:24–26, “The LORD bless you, and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; The LORD turn his face toward you, and give you peace.” The Lord shone upon these children with presence, touch, and speech. His words and actions together express an emphatic promise that those who have the outlook of children belong in the kingdom of God.

Involvement Learning

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Into the Lesson

Do you agree or disagree with each statement? Explain your answer.

1. Children should be seen and not heard.
2. Children are a blessing.
3. Children are a burden.
4. Children bring a delightful perspective.
5. Children are worth my time and effort.

Children hold a special perspective on life. Jesus loved and included them in his teaching. Today we will see how he used them as models for our faith.

Key Text

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

—Matthew 10:15

Into the Word

Read Mark 9:36–37, 42; and 10:13–16. What did Jesus want the disciples to understand from his actions and his words?

Would you describe Jesus’ actions and teachings here as “child-centric” or “adult-centric”? Why?

How does Mark 9:30–35 add to our understanding of what Jesus is teaching in 9:36–37, 42?

How does the phrase “in my name” limit and/or deepen the meaning of what Jesus is teaching here?

In 10:14–15, could Jesus be talking about more than children? Why or why not?

Into Life

List ways believers can exhibit child-like faith.

How can we develop a childlike attitude toward life?

Identify people, besides children, whom you consider to be “the least of these.”

Thought to Remember

The kingdom of God belongs to the childlike.