

Focus Text

“Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” And he laid his hands on them and went away.”

(Matthew 19:13–15, ESV)

Little Children

If you've been in church for any length of time, you've almost certainly heard that Jesus loves the little children. Matthew 19 is the passage we turn to most often to make that point. But you might be surprised to find that there's much more to this short story than the fact that Jesus loves children. It points to a bigger picture.

First, it was common during the Day of Atonement for people to bring their children to the elders so they could pray over them and lay hands on them. As the notes suggest, we don't really know what time of year this took place, so it may well have been the Day of Atonement. Whatever the season, Jesus is showing us something important: the priority of loving those who have nothing left to give.

This comes right after the discussion on marriage, where the disciples hear Jesus's strict but beautiful view of marriage as permanent. Here, it seems they also have no patience for people of low social rank who have nothing to contribute. Like most people of their time, the disciples saw children as almost less than human, for two main reasons. The first was psychological: people didn't get attached to small children because the death rate for infants and young people was extremely high. It's estimated that six out of ten people didn't live to adulthood, and adulthood for them meant age 15 or 16. The second reason is more interesting. In ancient Near Eastern culture, social standing was based on contribution: What can you add to the family? Children naturally ranked lowest in the family because they needed constant care and gave nothing back. So most people brushed them aside and placed them on the same level as slaves, or even lower, since slaves could at least contribute something even though they weren't free. Jesus and his followers appear to be heading toward Jerusalem for Passover and the celebrations that await them. The disciples have no patience for a distraction that puts them behind schedule, so they tell the parents to take their children and move aside. In their view, Jesus is far too popular and powerful to be bothered by the lowest members of society. But Jesus has something to teach them, and us.

Jesus affirms the tradition of praying for and blessing children. More than that, as a sign of closeness and as an example for the disciples, he formally lays his hands on them. This isn't a quick, one-word blessing; he takes time to bless each child properly. As a side note, for all the arguments that Jesus wasn't a rabbi, here is another moment where people treat him as a formal teacher and ask him to perform a rabbinic duty. Back to the main story: Jesus affirms the tradition of blessing the children, but his message goes much deeper.

Jesus then declares that the kingdom of heaven belongs to people like these children. That statement surely shocked both the crowd and the disciples. After all, these were the same men who had been arguing about how great they would be in the kingdom of heaven because of the amazing things they had done with Jesus's authority. But Jesus, echoing the Beatitudes, tells the disciples a truth they needed to hear: contribution does not earn anyone the kingdom. What matters is humility and admitting our desperate need. The children are a perfect visual lesson for all of us. Jesus reminds the crowd, the parents, and the disciples that these children are precious to him, and that their vulnerability and need make them perfect candidates to receive the kingdom of heaven.

Our additional texts today help us see an even bigger picture. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus goes to the synagogue, as was his custom, and reads from Isaiah 61. His words remind us that the Spirit of the Lord rests on him and gives him the authority to proclaim the kingdom. When he describes who will inherit that kingdom, he names the poor, the oppressed, and the blind. These are people who cannot earn their way in and must depend completely on a Savior to meet their deepest need. Can you see how countercultural this is? In their culture, status was earned directly through how much a person could contribute. But Jesus makes it very clear that this is not how anyone inherits the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom isn't about what you can give; it's about accepting what Jesus offers. The sad reality is that you can serve on every church board, preach 1,000 sermons, lead every Bible study in the county, and baptize hundreds of thousands of people. You can do all the right things, but that is not how you inherit the kingdom. One central thing comes before all of those activities: realizing your desperate need for a Savior. To be clear, we are not talking about what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," which is grace without a changed life. We are talking about the order of salvation and sanctification. God moves first. We accept his gift by faith, and the Holy Spirit comes to live in us. Then God keeps working, and we keep cooperating with him. An unsaved person can do many good things. What no one can do is perform enough good deeds to earn a place in the kingdom, because the kingdom isn't won through activity. It is built on humility and relationship.

God truly loves his people. He wants to save them and to give them the power to live for him. We need a shift in mindset, away from activity and toward relationship. First we come to understand who God is and what he wants to do. Then we can begin to join him in a transformed life. Jesus loves these little children, and in the same way he loves people who have nothing left to contribute but who recognize their need.

The Apostle Paul makes the same point when he writes to the church in Ephesus. He reminds them that God's grace was at work before they could respond. In the Wesleyan tradition, we call this prevenient grace. We believe the Lord has been calling you into his kingdom since before you were born, and that he loved you even while you were still a sinner. The well-known verse in Ephesians says we are not saved by our works. That isn't because our works don't matter; a transformed life is evidence of the fruit of salvation. Rather, we aren't saved by works because that would give us reason to boast. No one who enters God's kingdom brags about how hard they worked to get there. Instead, everyone in God's kingdom joins the elders in the book of Revelation, throwing their crowns down at Jesus's feet and saying, "I'm not worthy to be here, but because of God's great love, he has saved me."

Application

Learning to Be Gracious

This week's application is about humility. When I find myself getting offended, it's often because I've forgotten that I'm no more or less important than the person standing next to me. A few weeks ago, Mike Todd preached on the unforgiving servant, who quickly forgot the grace he had been given and then faced his master's judgment. In the same way, when Jesus loves these little children, he reminds us that he loved us before we could even respond. His saving grace doesn't depend on how hard we work. One practical way we can live this out is by growing in humility. This week, write in a journal about a time you learned humility, and also about a time you lacked it. As we grow in humility, we will see more and more of how wide God's loving grace is toward us and toward others. Amen.

Additional Scriptures

“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” **(Luke 4:16–21, ESV)**

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,” **(Ephesians 2:4–8, ESV)**

Additional Notes

“Laying on of hands, accompanied by prayer, formed a typical Jewish “blessing”—asking God for his favor to rest on someone, a practice rooted in Old Testament precedent like Jacob’s blessing of his sons.^[1] To bring children to the elders on the evening of the Day of Atonement for a blessing and prayer was a Jewish custom, and while there is no indication of when the events of 19:13–15 took place, it is possible that this custom lay behind the request that Jesus bless the children. Certainly the desire that Jesus place his hands on the children and pray for them fits the Day of Atonement practices.^[2]

The disciples’ resistance to this custom reveals their priorities rather than any problem with the practice itself. The disciples are annoyed at a further interruption of their journey, perhaps betraying the generally low esteem in which children were held in antiquity.^[1] Perhaps the disciples rebuked those who brought the children because they felt the title elder was inappropriate for Jesus. Given the other titles Jesus bore—Prophet, Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah, and Lord—the disciples may have believed Him to be too busy to do things assigned to elders.^[2]

Jesus’ response affirms the legitimacy of the custom while redirecting its significance. The act of laying hands on another’s head was a common gesture in praying a blessing in the ancient world, and Matthew’s brief comment illustrates that not only did Jesus teach the value of children, He spent the time necessary to touch them and bless them.^[2]¹

¹ [1] Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 22:295.

[2] Roger L. Hahn, *Matthew: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 232–233.

“High infant mortality rates among rural peasants may have made ancient Mediterranean parents slower to form deep attachments to younger children[1], but this doesn’t fully explain children’s low social status.

Picture the ancient world as a rigid social ladder where your worth depended entirely on what you could do and what you could give back. A wealthy landowner could trade favors with a merchant. A merchant could negotiate with a craftsman. But a child? A child had no intrinsic exploitable value—no status, no rights, no power, no position, not even the ability to give back what they have received.[2] In the highly stratified society of the ancient Greco-Roman world, maintaining one’s honor on the social ladder required associations with someone in a comparable rank or above, but never with those below.[2] That’s how the ancient world viewed children. Little children were not worth much at all, and hence relegated to the bottom rung of the social ladder.[2]

So when Jesus picked up a child and placed them beside him as an example of greatness, he wasn’t just being sentimental. Although ancient parents loved their children, within the social structure children were at the very bottom in rank.[2] He was fundamentally inverting their entire value system—elevating someone the culture had deemed worthless and teaching that true greatness means serving those who can never repay you.”²

² [1] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 448.

[2] Diane G. Chen, *Luke: A New Covenant Commentary*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Craig Keener, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 136–137.