

# "Little Children"

## Mark 10:13-16

- We will reference Matthew and Luke's account of this episode from the life of Christ as we study this text as well (Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17).

There are a few important introductory points to consider in this touching episode from the life of Christ.

First, each Gospel writer notes that "they brought" children to Jesus (Matt. 19:13; Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15). The pronoun "they" is masculine or neuter in form, which in Greek often functions generically. It refers to people as a group, not exclusively to men or fathers. However, Luke's account adds a significant detail: they were bringing infants (βρέφη) to Him. That word refers to very small children, perhaps even babies, and it strongly suggests that parents were involved, since it would have been uncommon for anyone other than a mother or father to bring an infant. While we can't be dogmatic about whether both parents were present, it's a reasonable and biblically consistent application to emphasize the responsibility of both fathers and mothers in bringing their children to Jesus. *(NOTE: With that said, I will reference the parents involved throughout this message even though there may have been exceptions to that rule.)* It is also a reminder to the church that we are to assist families in this vital work, never replacing the role of the home, but helping reinforce the call to lead children to Christ.

Second, it will be helpful and useful to consider the different terms used in the three gospel accounts: "little children" (παιδίον – Matt. 19:13), "young children" (παιδίον – Mark 10:13), and "infants" (βρέφη – Luke 18:15). Some traditions that practice infant baptism attempt to use this passage in support of that view. However, the context does not support such a conclusion. Jesus does not

baptize these children; He receives them, blesses them, and uses them as an illustration of the kind of faith required to enter the kingdom of God.

While the passage encompasses a range of ages (from infants to children old enough to come to Jesus on their own), the faith Jesus highlights is clearly that of those capable of trusting Him. He blesses all the children, even the youngest, as an expression of His love; a truth that points to what we often call “baby” or “child dedications” today. But the kingdom (as is referenced in this text) belongs to those who believe, and even a child can do that.

A third consideration is the context surrounding this event. In Matthew and Mark’s gospels, the account of Jesus receiving the children follows immediately after His teaching on marriage and divorce. This placement is not coincidental. Jesus had just addressed the sanctity of marriage, the consequences of its breakdown, and the value of a stable, God-ordained family structure. In that context, the emphasis on welcoming and blessing children serves to underscore the heart of God for the home, and His concern for how the next generation is shaped. A broken family structure can have lasting effects on children, which is why God’s design and the church’s support are so vital.

Jesus cared deeply for children. He welcomed them. He defended them. He called attention to their faith. As a church, we must do the same.

## **I. CHILDREN WERE BROUGHT TO JESUS – MATT. 19:13; MARK 10:13; LUKE 18:15**

Matthew 19:13

<sup>13</sup> Then were there brought unto him little children...

Mark 10:13

<sup>13</sup> And they brought young children to him...

<sup>15</sup> And they brought unto him also infants...

**A. That He would touch them – Matt. 19:13; Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15)**

1. Matthew states: "that he should put his hands on them"; Mark states: "that he should touch them"; Luke states: "that he would touch them."

Something interesting can be found here. There are two different Greek words used for the desire the parents that brought the children to Jesus had for their children.

- a) Matthew and Mark use a word (ἐπιθῆ) that has the idea of a more deliberate, formal action of putting hands on someone. This is the same verb used throughout the New Testament for the laying on of hands in formal blessing, ordination, and healing contexts.

Acts 6:6

<sup>6</sup> Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid *their* hands on them.

1 Timothy 4:14

<sup>14</sup> Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.

- b) Luke uses a completely different word (ἄπτηται) which speaks to a simple, natural desire of parents for Jesus to have physical contact with their children. Rather than the formal aspect of Matthew and Mark, Luke (by inspiration of the Holy Spirit) chose to emphasize the closeness and compassion they sought from Jesus.

This is seen in Luke's choice of "infants" (βρέφη)

rather than the more general term, "little children" (παιδίον), the choice of Matthew and Mark. While "little children" can refer to children of all ages (from infants to older children), Luke's deliberate use of "infants" emphasizes that some of the children brought were very young babies. This highlights the tender, parental desire they had for Jesus simply to touch their babies.

2. Let me make a crucial point here.

The use of the terms here for bringing children to Jesus have great implication today for the church. We need to ask ourselves (both as individual parents at home as well as a church): "Are we creating an environment where parents feel comfortable bringing even their newest babies into the presence of Jesus through worship and fellowship? Or are we, like the disciples, suggesting that babies are somehow inappropriate or disruptive in spiritual settings?"

#### **B. "That He should...pray" for them (Matt. 19:13)**

1. They recognized Jesus as a great "Rabbi" (Teacher) and were likely bringing their children to Him so that He might touch them as a sign of Divine favor and to pray over them for God's blessing, protection, and spiritual growth. This was a customary practice then.
2. They brought their children to Jesus because they understood the power of prayer and seemed to be seeking the most effective prayer they could find for them.
3. This is the connection spoken of earlier on

“baby dedication.” It’s not given as an ordinance, or a command and it has nothing to do with their salvation, but it does follow a pattern that is good to emulate.

**C. That He should bless them (Matt. 19:15; Mark 10:16)**

1. In the ancient Roman Empire of Jesus’s day, with the Grecian influence on the culture, children were often seen as having little status. In the act of purposefully blessing the children, He lifted them out of that status and showed they had very great worth.
2. The idea of “blessing” someone today is seen as:
  - a) Invoking God’s favor on someone. For example, a pastor might bless a congregation by praying for their spiritual growth and/or well-being.

**Numbers 6:22-26**

<sup>22</sup> And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, <sup>23</sup> Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them,

<sup>24</sup> The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: <sup>25</sup> The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: <sup>26</sup> The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

- b) An expression of gratitude or praise: “God bless you.”
  - c) An empowerment for God’s purpose: we see this when blessing a missionary before they go to the field, asking God to give them wisdom and protection.

3. The form of the word that Mark uses for “blessed them” (κατευλόγει) is only used this one time in the Bible (the root of the word is quite common) and it is combined in a way as to show an intense, directional blessing.

- a) Jesus wasn’t just “going through the motions,” so to speak, of a formal blessing. He took time for each child, embracing them, and poured out a blessing on them. He loved them with more than words: He loved them with His life.

The form of the verb for “blessed” (imperfect) denotes continuous, repeated, or ongoing action in the past. In other words, Jesus didn’t just bless them all at once and move on. He was blessing them “again and again,” or one-by-one. It shows His absolute love and affection for children.

- b) NOTE: Only Mark mentions that Jesus “took them up in His arms” – what a beautiful picture this is.

## II. CAUTION WAS GIVEN TO THE DISCIPLES – MATT. 19:14; MARK 10:14; LUKE 18:16

### Matthew 19:13-14

<sup>13</sup> ... and the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> But Jesus said, *Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.*

### Mark 10:13-14

<sup>13</sup>...and *his* disciples rebuked those that brought *them*. <sup>14</sup> 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.*

### Luke 18:15-16

<sup>15</sup>...but when *his* disciples saw *it*, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called them *unto him*, and said, *Suffer little children*

to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.

**A. Jesus was “much displeased” with the disciples – Mark 10:14.**

1. Mark is the only one that makes the statement that Jesus was “much displeased” because of the rebuke the disciples gave to those that brought the children to Jesus.
2. All three make the statement that the disciples “rebuked” them for bringing children to Jesus.
  - a) Luke uses a form of the verb (imperfect) that may indicate a repeated action, while the other two use a form (aorist) that, as used here, seem to imply an event that began at a specific time but had an ongoing aspect to it (similar to Luke’s use of the verb form). Regardless, the point is that they didn’t just make an announcement that children weren’t allowed, they were actively stopping them.
  - b) We must be careful that we don’t interfere with anyone wanting to bring their children to church to hear about Jesus, no matter how young they are.
3. It was for this that Jesus was “much displeased” with the disciples. It hurt Him deeply that they didn’t understand how important children were to Him, and how, as He would state, they are critical to one’s understanding of entrance into the kingdom of God.

**B. Jesus cautioned them to let the children through**

There are two parts to this caution: “Suffer the little children” and “Forbid them not” – all three use this phrase in some form.

1. Jesus uses an imperative form of the verb here. He's not just making a polite request or offering a suggestion. This is a very direct, urgent command given in a tone that would have gotten their attention.
2. The word for "suffer" (ἀφίημι), as used in this context, carries the sense of not hindering or blocking something that naturally wants to happen. It's not meant to be seen as actively causing something to happen, but instead you're removing the barriers that prevent it from happening on its own.

In other words, Jesus isn't telling the disciples to actively recruit children, or to convince parents to bring their little ones, or, as we might think today, to create programs that might attract families. He simply commands them to get out of the way and stop interfering with their approach to Him.

What about churches today? Or parents today, for that matter? Have we placed obstacles in the way of children coming to Jesus? Policies, attitudes, or practices that function like what the disciples were doing in preventing access, even though they might have had the right intentions?

3. "Forbid them not" (μὴ κωλύετε αὐτὰ) – in this form (imperfect), this means "don't keep on preventing them." It's a command to permanently change their attitude and approach toward children seeking access to Jesus.

### III. CHILD-LIKE "RECEPTIVITY" IS THE PATTERN GIVEN –



## MATT. 19:14C; MARK 10:14C-15; LUKE 18:16C-17

Matthew 19:14

<sup>14</sup> ... for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

Mark 10:14-15

<sup>14</sup> ... for of such is the kingdom of God. <sup>15</sup> Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.

Luke 18:16-17

<sup>16</sup> ...for of such is the kingdom of God. <sup>17</sup> Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.

### A. Mark and Luke clarify and define what is meant by, "for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

*"Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein."*

### B. What is meant by the "receptivity" of a child?

While we often think of this passage as teaching "child-like faith," Jesus is actually pointing to something even more fundamental: the simple, unencumbered way a child receives a gift. These children didn't come to Jesus thinking about whether they deserved his blessing or worrying about what they could offer in return or about what work they could do or what service they could perform to earn it. They simply received what was offered with "open hearts and hands." Just what we are to do with the gift of God's grace.

We might naturally think Jesus is praising these children for their faith, but as we look more carefully at what He's actually showing, we see these little ones aren't demonstrating great faith as much as they're demonstrating something we adults often struggle with: the ability to simply

receive without complicating the process.

**C. Receiving “the kingdom of God” is to accept His gift of grace as found in the gospel message itself.**

John 3:3

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said unto him, *Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

John 3:5

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, *Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*

These little ones weren't trying to earn Jesus's blessing through good behavior or religious performance. They simply came (or were brought) to receive what Jesus offered. This is a perfect illustration of how everyone, regardless of age, must approach the gospel. We can't qualify ourselves for God's grace; we simply receive what God offers through Christ.

Conclusion: As children come to hear about Jesus, we need to be very cautious that we don't get in their way or hinder them from hearing about Him, whether it's through unwelcoming attitudes toward families with young children, overly rigid expectations about behavior in worship, or simply failing to allow children to be children.

Jesus doesn't just call us to welcome children; He also calls us to learn from them. It is their simple desire to receive whatever Jesus has to give them that becomes our pattern as adults for receiving the kingdom of God.

Remember, Jesus wasn't mildly annoyed with his disciples' attitude of standing in the way of the children: He was deeply (“much”) displeased. This tells us how seriously He takes both the welcome we extend to

children and the simplicity with which we approach Him ourselves.

The wonderful truth is that God's kingdom – His grace, His forgiveness, His eternal life – comes to us as a gift to be received, not something to be earned. Just as these children came to Jesus with “open hands and an open heart,” so we can come to Him today.

So, let me ask you: Are we creating the kind of church environment where children naturally want to come to Jesus? And are we approaching God ourselves with the simple trust that he desires?

A well-known evangelist once told the story of a little girl who came to him after a church service and said she wanted to be saved. The evangelist, concerned she might be too young to understand, gently asked her some questions.

“Why do you want to be saved?”

She replied, “Because I’m a sinner and I want Jesus to forgive me.”

Still unsure, the evangelist asked, “What do you think Jesus did for sinners?”

The little girl answered, “He died on the cross for my sins, and He rose again. And I believe that.”

He paused, still hesitant, and said, “That’s good... but do you think you’re ready to really trust Him with your whole life?”

The little girl looked puzzled and said, “I thought that’s what I just said.”

Later, the preacher admitted: “I was trying to protect her from making a decision she didn’t understand — but I almost talked her out of one she clearly did.”