

Introduction

Surely, it is important to keep Matthew 18.1-6 in view when we dig for the meaning of Matthew 19.13-15 (our text for today). Matthew 18 tells us that Jesus put a small child in the midst of big adults. With the little child before them, He taught the lesson of childlikeness. Any who want to enter the kingdom of God and find greatness in it must humble themselves like that child (18.3). In other words, entry into the kingdom for both children and adults is by humble submission to Christ. Reference to children occurs again in Matthew 19. However, there is a difference of emphasis. In 18, the emphasis is on the lesson adults should learn *from* children, but in 19, emphasis is on a lesson adults should learn *about* children. We can also see this difference of emphasis when we compare Matthew with Mark and Luke:

Matthew ¹³ Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, ¹⁴but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." ¹⁵ And he laid his hands on them and went away (Mat 19.13-15).

Mark ¹³ And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them (Mk 10.13-16).

Luke ¹⁵ Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (Lk 18.15-17).

Notably, Matthew 19 does not include instruction on the childlike spirit, but the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke both have it. Matthew's record of the incident ends the quote of Jesus after the phrase "**to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.**" Whereas, both Mark and Luke follow this phrase with exactly the same quote, **Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it** (Mk 10.15; Lk 18.17). Therefore, the lesson on the childlike spirit is implicit in Matthew 19, but not explicit. By omitting this lesson (by leaving it implicit), Matthew directs our attention to literal children that people brought to the Lord Jesus. Thus, it seems appropriate to title today's message "Bringing Children to Christ." Our text is Matthew 19.13-15 along with the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke. Accordingly, the outline is twofold: attitudes about bringing children to Christ, and the duty of bringing children to Christ.

1A. Attitudes about bringing children to Christ

We can begin by noting that there are three attitudes toward little children displayed in the story. They specifically display attitudes about bringing children to the Lord.

1) First, we have the attitude of the bringers

The people who brought these children did so with a positive, hopeful, and perhaps superstitious attitude. I mention the idea of possible superstition because Mark and Luke tell us that they brought the children to Jesus **that he might touch them**. Sometimes, people sought the Lord's literal touch for healing and blessing *in unbelief*. They wanted the miracle; they sought the benefits, the literal bread to eat, but they did not want Christ (cf. Jn 2.23-24). However, Matthew puts their action in a better light. He says, **Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray**. The attitude of these bringers seems to move in the right direction when we hear that they seek the prayers of Christ on behalf of the children; they seek the blessing that comes from His intercession. The first attitude is positive and hopeful.

2) Second, we have the attitude of the disciples

The disciples saw what was going on (Lk 18.15) and for some reason (that the narrators do not disclose) they rebuked the bringers. What attitude does this indicate? We do not know what prompted the rebuke, which is a forceful action much stronger than a mere request. They think that there is something wrong going on here, something that needs forceful counteraction. They were apparently annoyed. They seem to feel that the little children have no business there

in the presence of Christ for whatever reason (distraction, futility, etc). The idea might be that Jesus has more important things to do and His time is precious (He has bigger fish to fry, so how can He give time to these small fries?). Perhaps, they do not trust the people, but we can be sure that they do not give sufficient value to the bringing of little ones to Christ to offset the wrongs they detect (inappropriateness, timing, etc). Bottom line: we can call their attitude negative and restraining about bringing children to the Lord.

3) Third, we have the attitude of the Savior

How shall we characterize our Lord's attitude about bringing little children to Him? His attitude is forcefully positive, receiving, and welcoming. The Gospel of Mark explicitly points us to the matter of attitude when it says, **he was indignant and said to them, Let the children come to me** (10.14). The important words "let the children come" are a rebuke of the disciples for their rebuke of the people. Clearly, it is an angry, stern, and forceful rebuke because Mark reports that Jesus was "indignant" in speaking the words of welcome regarding children. Therefore, He rebuked the rebukers.

Accordingly, Jesus called the children to Him (Lk 18.16a). We can picture the disciples blocking people holding the children at their sides, squeezing their hands tightly. The disciples serve as a closed door fencing off the children and barring them entrance into the presence of Christ. The rebuke by Jesus opens the door. In giving the rebuke, Jesus calls the children to Him at the same time that He says to the disciples and the people; **Let the children come to me**. The disciples step aside, people let go of the children, and the little ones "come a runnin'" to Jesus. What does Jesus then do? Marvelously and beautifully, He laid His hands on them, touched them, embraced them, took them up in His arms, and blessed them.

Now, we can move on to the duty of bringing children to Christ that Jesus proclaimed in His rebuke (in the tone, what Jesus says is a rebuke; in content, it gives a duty).

2A. The duty of bringing children to Christ

Jesus exhorts the disciples and us (then and now) when He firmly commands that we bring little children to Him: **Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven** (Mat 19.14).

Much discussion and debate exists on this text, especially regarding covenant membership and infant baptism. It may be good to work on our text in the context of the three Gospel accounts by asking some questions.

1) Does Luke indicate the presence of infants?

Luke uses a word that usually refers to infants as in the birth narratives of Christ (Lk 2.12, 16): **they were bringing even infants to him** (ESV, Lk 18.15). The following comments put this fact into perspective.

a) It is possible that infants were part of the group along with little children. However, that is not necessarily the case. It is conceivable that Luke simply varies his vocabulary and uses "infant" in the sense of very young children, namely, those closest to infancy.

b) When Paul speaks of Timothy as learning the Scriptures as an infant (2 Tim 3.15), he means from earliest childhood. The mother and grandmother of Timothy taught him the Scriptures when he was a young child, a very young child, emerging from infancy. This adds weight to the idea that Luke simply varies terminology without including infants in his record.

c) Luke's use of "even" or "also" does not automatically teach that the people brought infants along with the little children (as another category additional to little children). It may allude to the fact that people brought the sick to Jesus so that He would touch them, and now, they "also" brought little children so that He would touch them too (it could also indicate a relation between children and the very youngest of the young "also").

d) "Bringing" the children does not necessitate that we conclude they are infants. Parents bring three year olds and eight year olds to school, to the teacher in the classroom, and to church.

e) Matthew's reference earlier to literal children who believe and who serve as examples of what God requires for entrance into the kingdom (Mat 18.1-6) argues that we think here about

children who believe rather than infants. In our effort to understand the text, we cannot let the possibility that infants are in view (per the common word for infant) offset the emphasis on children who believe, on children that we are to encourage to believe.

f) The fact that they are to come to Christ (**Let the little children come to me**) indicates that they are not infants (at the very least, infants are not primarily in view if in view at all). If we picture little ones leaving the hands of their parents to run into the embracing arms of Christ, are we to think that this is merely an “external” coming? In the context of Matthew 18.3, Mark, and Luke on the lesson in childlike faith, a mere external understanding of the incident goes against the flow of the text in its context. We should conclude that Jesus is speaking about children who come to Him literally, into His very arms, *in faith*.

2) What can we infer about the visible church from this account if infants are present?

Even if infants are part of the group, and the text thereby teaches that infants possess the kingdom (have salvation), this fact does not confirm the claim that infants are therefore members of the visible church. It would confirm the fact that they are members of the invisible church, but that does not enable us to count all children of believing parents (of parents who are now children of Abraham by faith) as little Christians, the children of God, the children of Abraham, and members of the visible church with title to the sacraments. For one reason, we know nothing of the faith of these parents (there is no confession of faith though they are hopeful of benefits for the little ones). In this connection, Ridderbos, who believes in infant baptism, says of Matthew 19.13-15, “Jesus was not saying here that the kingdom belongs to the children of believers, who are included along with their parents in the covenant of grace” (*Matthew* 352).

Furthermore, and pointedly, without looking into the heart, who are we to consider and treat as sons of God and heirs of the kingdom? Those who own their spiritual poverty are the ones that, in charity, we can identify as heirs of the kingdom and thus count them to be children of God and members of the church. Many passages ground this conclusion. a) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses language very similar to what we have in Matthew 19 (cf. **to such belongs the kingdom**, Mat 19.14, with **theirs is the kingdom**, Mat 5.3). In the Sermon, He tells us that the kingdom belongs to repentant peacemakers; they are the ones who have right to the title “sons of God” (Mat 5.3-4, 9). b) In the parable of the prodigal, Jesus teaches that the wayward and rebellious sons that are worthy to be sons of the Father are the ones who say, “Father, I am not worthy to be your son.” c) The apostle John says that the ones who we call the children of God are those who make that fact evident in the practice of righteousness. This practice involves love, commandments, and fulfilling the command to believe (1 Jn 3.1, 23; 2.29; he says, we are assured of their standing if they practice righteousness, and on that basis, we consider them born of God and adopted into sonship). What should we conclude from these passages? They teach us to count and treat people of repentance and faith as children of God, as Christians. Thus, whomever it may be that actually has kingdom salvation, whether young or old, whether infant or aged, we know nothing of it because we cannot see the heart. We count and treat repentant peacemakers as God’s children.

3) Does this text (and its parallels) support infant baptism?

The text does not support a) the baptism b) of infants c) into the visible church. There is no mention of membership in the visible church or baptism into it anywhere in the text (either directly or indirectly), and the presence of infants is unlikely. Given that infants are not necessarily present on this occasion, that even if they were, the text does not support new covenant membership in the visible church, and given the fact that baptism is not in view in any shape or form, we can safely conclude that this text does not support infant baptism.

4) What is the point of the text?

There are two critical sub-points. The text shows that Jesus welcomes children who believe in Him, and it shows that these children (then and now) serve to illustrate the only way of entrance into the kingdom. If we want to know the ones Jesus welcomes to His side, the ones He lifts in His arms in prayer to the Father, that He lifts in His arms to heaven, the answer is the children who come to Him: **Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of**

God. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them (Mk 10.14-16). This reeks with the fact that we all are children of the Father who have strayed into the far country. Jesus welcomes children lost in prodigality (wasting the Father's goods). He welcomes lost and wayward prodigals who come to Him in humble submissive faith. These actual little children embody the gospel in their very persons; by faith as children, they embrace Christ and enter the kingdom showing that all who embrace Christ as children (with childlike humility) enter the kingdom in this way, and only in this way.

In this light, what is the main point of the text? The main point is to state and ground the duty of disciples to children (then and now). The duty is to allow them to come to Christ, not hinder them, and thus to encourage them. On that occasion in the past, they came to Him both literally and in faith. Now, they are to come to Him in faith. The point of the text is to encourage pastors to encourage disciples to encourage parents to encourage children to come to Christ. We do not simply say, "Go to Christ," but "come" because this way of putting it accents His overture (**Jesus called them to him**, Lk 15.16). The ground of the duty to "let them come and to encourage them to come" is that theirs is the kingdom (by repentant faith) as He said in the Sermon. In other words, *children have the kingdom the same way that the blessed man of the Beatitudes has the kingdom*. Moreover, *the blessed man has it in the same that children have it*: by humble submissive faith. Children have the kingdom in a pattern setting way that shows that all must come like they come, all must come as children, in the posture of childlikeness.

Concluding applications

1) The kingdom is coming with power and little children have a place in it.

The church must overcome thoughts and actions that limit the place of children within the covenant community. We must not marginalize them. We must welcome them in our midst. This comports with having children present with us in worship. We should encourage parents to bring children with them to church, thus to bring them to the Lord Jesus seeking His blessing on them.

This account gives us a great lesson in our duty to bring our children to Christ. We come to Him because of His welcome. We come to Him as intercessor between God and man (as Jacob's ladder from earth to heaven), and as such, we seek Him to intercede for our children that God may bless their eyes and ears in the things of the kingdom.

2) There is dual meaning here for then and now (for pre-and post-resurrection times)

Let the children come; do not hinder them (but help them come, point the way for them); encourage them to come to Jesus. Coming into His arms, they received Him as children, in their childhood, in the way of a child. They received Him with childlike humble faith. Back then, they actually believed in Him and received Him. Back then, they actually embraced Him. Back then, He actually lifted them up to heaven in His arms blessing them.

Now, how is this text relevant to children today? We say to the children, "Jesus says this to you: 'come to me.' The welcome is His welcome that He extends to you." Pastors tell parents to let the children come to Christ, "Do not hinder them, but encourage them."

How do you not hinder but encourage? You avoid hindrances first by being a good example, by living and embodying the gospel before the children. For example, parents (grandparents, uncles, aunts) need to be examples of prayer before them in the home where they hear you pray in earnest. They need to hear you pray in the fellowship of the saints, in the context that involves fellowship with one another and with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I speak to parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles: you hinder the little ones by not singing the gospel to them and with them. You hinder them by not teaching them the gospel of the covenant of the NT, by not taking them to church, by not praying with them, by not teaching them to respect prayer and to respect the one to whom you pray. Poor examples discourage as much or more than physical restraint. These are unseen jail bars that are stronger than those of any prison. This is especially important for moms of little ones, to open the way to Christ and not block it by failure to pray with them and read Scripture to them.

Be like the mother and grandmother of Timothy who taught him the Scriptures from infancy. Be that kind of father, mother, grandfather, and grandmother. Be that kind of brother and sister in the church nurturing the little ones in your midst by word and example. The Scriptures are what make little ones wise unto salvation; so instruct the little ones in the Scriptures to point them to Christ promised in the OT and present in the NT.

You do not peer into the hearts of the little ones, nor do you access the secret will of God. What you do is encourage image bearers in need of restoration in God's image to come to Christ. You say to them, "come to Him; commit yourselves to Him as your teacher, go-between, and king." Tell them the gospel story. Tell them that God is their Father against whom they have sinned, so tell them to pray, tell them "pray to your Father in heaven, saying, 'Father, I am not worthy to be your son.'"

There is both a corporate and an individual dimension to this duty. Parent/bringers point children to Christ at home. The covenant community points children to Christ at church; in His name welcoming them; not causing them to sin, but helping them avoid sin.

3) This is a call to spread the gospel to all the lost, to all lost children in the world

In view are all of God's children who return with one claim on their lips, "I am not worthy to be your child." The literal children of this actual historical account represent all children in the fall, all men, women, and children, who come to God by coming to Christ. If we miss this point due to the polemics regarding covenant children, we miss something extremely important. The literal little ones are models of what disciples are to be. As such, they have a significant place in the presence of Christ as He goes about doing His work. They are a paradigm for all disciples regarding both entry into the kingdom and greatness in it.

Because of the way that Jesus makes the little child represent all men, women, and children who would enter the kingdom, this is a text about our duty as disciples to encourage all prodigals in our fallen world to come to Christ. We are not to prevent or hinder their coming but encourage it by presenting them with the overture of Christ to them: "come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden with the burden of your sins. Come to me and learn from me; take my yoke to live under my kingly authority, and here is my promise, I will give you rest for your souls" (Mat 11.28-30).

Explain the good news to family and neighbor as God enables you, and pray that He does enable you. Here is the message. The coming of children to Jesus, as it were, running into His embrace to be lifted to heaven by His arms pictures saving faith. With vulnerability, openness, submissiveness, and humility, children "come to Jesus." Thus, we say, do you realize, my friend, that you are a wayward child of God like the son in the parable of the prodigal? If you return to the Father and tell Him that you are not worthy to be His child, He will receive you with open arms and celebrate your homecoming. The same story that we repeat to our children we repeat to the children of the fallen world. Tell them all: "You are rebellious children, lost sons of the Father in heaven. You are enemies of the Lord, but if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will become redeemed sons and daughters of the king. If you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is the risen Lord, then you are royal family members in the household of God."

Bottom line: do not be like the disciples who were negative and restraining. Be like the bringers who were positive and hopeful about bringing children of this world to Christ. In fact, emulate Christ who welcomes lost children and encourages others to bring them to Him.

May we fall down before the majesty of our loving and gracious Father in heaven; may we acknowledge what prodigals we are in the fall and the loving-kindness that brought us from our misery in the far country so that we may become the children of God by childlike faith in Christ; to Him be the glory forever, amen.