



Matthew 19:13–15

13 Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. 14 Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” 15 When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

Reflection

From marriage, divorce and singleness to children. The church is the family of God and the family unit within the church is very important to Jesus. As are the most vulnerable amongst us. Little children. You'll remember that Jesus' teaching about the church began in Matthew 18 by placing a little child amongst his disciples as a model for what membership in the kingdom of heaven is all about. We enter the kingdom of God through childlike humility and faith, in utter dependence on our Father in heaven. And those who adopt the lowliest status in the kingdom of God are the greatest amongst us. But placing that little child amongst his disciples was more than simply a sermon illustration. Jesus said in Matthew 18:5 that,

5 ... whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

In response to these words from Jesus the world's view of the value and worth of children, and the rights of children changed forever. With these words so fresh in their minds it's hard to understand the disciples' actions in our passage today. Hard to understand but also not so hard to understand. After all, don't we do the same thing all the time? Sunday's sermon strikes us deeply and then by Tuesday morning we need reminding all over again.

The disciples' reminder came when some people brought their little children to Jesus for him to bless them. This wasn't un-

usual in Jewish society which was not as callous to children as the culture that surrounded them. Greek and Roman fathers often exercised their legal right to discard unwanted infants. And yet as is the case amongst every minority group, some of these cultural influences no doubt seeped in. While children were loved and seen as a blessing within the Jewish culture, they still very much had their place, and their low status mirrored that of the Gentile world. Perhaps this explains the disciples' actions in rebuking either the parents who brought the children or the children themselves who came to Jesus.

It says something of Jesus' gracious nature and his visible goodness that children seem to be drawn to him, doesn't it? Children have a keen sense in this area,

and throughout the gospels we have the impression that they are drawn to Jesus. Their instinct is proved right because instead of rebuking the children Jesus rebukes his disciples. His gentle openness to these children, his compassionate touch and his protective words elevate them from being irrelevant in this society to being valuable objects for gospel outreach. It's significant and actually quite surprising that Jesus is only recorded as specifically praying for people twice in the gospels. Once for Peter in Luke 22 and the other time for these children.

Another striking feature of this passage is Matthew's placement of it. In between the Jewish religious leaders, the highest figures in Judaism who are quibbling over divorce-for-any cause questions and a

passage about a man who is a rich young ruler, an aspirational figure in Graeco-Roman society, are these little children. They have no status, no power, no connections, no wisdom, no wealth, no responsibility, they have nothing according to the values of the world. But in their weakness they provide the perfect model of the kind of people to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. It doesn't belong to the great ones of the land, to the Pharisees or to rich young rulers, but to ones such as them. These children have nothing at all to contribute to their entry into the kingdom. They are simply brought to the right person and he blesses them. What's the picture of the kingdom of God here? It's those who come to Jesus like little children, in humility and faith, who receive his blessing.

But there's more isn't there? Jesus' special concern for these children suggests that Christians should highly prize their young people. Sharing the gospel with children should ever remain our priority, especially in light of children's particular openness to the gospel. Have you ever seen how much little children love bible stories? Time and time again, Christian parents or no, it's children's bibles that take pride of place on the bookshelves and in the bedtime stories of our little ones. Why not buy a dozen children's bibles and make them presents for the two and three year old birthday parties of your non-Christian friends? A great bible for this is the Jesus Story Book Bible by Sally Lloyd-Jones. Watch how quickly these bibles become fast favourites with your friends' children

and then watch the gospel do its work. Pray not only that these little ones would come to Christ but that they would come to Christ and then lead their parents to him also.

Think

Take some time now to consider this passage for yourself. A few questions come to mind that might help you meditate over it. Are you bringing your children to Jesus? Are you reading to them? Are you praying with them? When they watch you (because they are always watching) do they see you reading your bible? Do they see you praying to Jesus? When they watch you and the way you relate to your husband or wife do they see Jesus in you? Are little children drawn to your gentleness

and openness, your gracious nature and visible goodness, like they were drawn to Jesus?

You also might like to consider how much of your prayer life, ministry and money is directed towards the needs of children, especially children in need. Do you sponsor a child through Christian organisations like Compassion? How does your church look after orphans as James 1:27 commands us to do? Or from another perspective have you given much thought to the fact that the vast majority of people make a decision for Christ before the age of eighteen? How can you get involved in this important mission field to young people? Whether it be through your time, your money or your prayers?

Pray

Close this time today by praying for our little children who have been blessed to be born into Christian families. Pray that we would faithfully keep bringing them to Christ until they one day bring us great joy by coming to him on their own. And pray also for the children of your non-Christian friends. Pray that God would raise up ways for you also to lead them to Christ, and their parents with them.