

Voices: The fuller meaning of receiving the kingdom of God like a child

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It is one of the most well-known and beloved teachings of Jesus. It appears in three of the four canonical Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is one of those Scripture passages you might crochet on a pillow.

“People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it’” (Luke 18:15-17 NRSV).

The story of Jesus warmly embracing small children has etched itself into the consciousness of Christians for generations. But what exactly does it mean to “receive the kingdom of God as a child?”

The popular interpretation

I heard numerous sermons and Sunday school lessons over this passage growing up, and while my own experience may not be representative for everyone else, I always was taught Jesus is commending “childlike faith.”

What is “childlike faith,” and how does one practice it? It is a simple, honest trust in God. It is defined by curiosity, innocence, wonder, among other things. Barnabas Piper has written a wonderful [blog post](#) exploring this subject, and “childlike faith” is certainly worthy of our reflection.

I do not believe, however, Jesus was talking primarily about “childlike faith.” I believe a close examination of this story in its historical and literary contexts reveals a more challenging message.

Children in Jesus’ world

To understand what it means to receive the kingdom of God as a child, we must understand how people viewed children in Jesus’ time. For many modern Americans, “childhood” conjures nostalgic images of a simpler, happier time. This is a far cry from childhood in the ancient world, however.

In the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary* on Luke, David Garland points out: “Children had no power, no status, and no rights, and they were regarded as insignificant and disposable, as witnessed by the exposure of (usually female) children in the Greco-Roman world.” Unwanted infants and children often would be left on their own in the wilderness to die.

While adults generally needed and wanted children to perpetuate family lines and to support them in old age, children legally were considered property. Given the enormously high mortality rate for infants and children, women were expected to produce as many children as possible to sustain society. Adults viewed children in largely pragmatic terms.

It would be anachronistic for modern American readers to project our nostalgia for childhood back onto the New Testament. Children were among the most vulnerable and marginalized people in Jesus’ world, and this provides the key to understanding what Jesus means when he exhorts his listeners to “receive the kingdom of God as a child.”

The literary context

When studying the Gospels, we must remember the evangelists do not recount events in strictly chronological order. More often than not, the Gospel narratives put events in thematic order. As such, one must pay careful attention to how the Gospels group together different stories and pieces of teaching from Jesus.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all include roughly the same version of the story we are considering here. Furthermore, the same story immediately follows the story about children in all three of these Gospels—the story of the “rich, young ruler.”

Many are familiar with this story about Jesus telling a man to give away all his wealth to the poor (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30). It is not a coincidence that this story occurs immediately after Jesus telling his disciples to receive the kingdom of God as a child.

Luke also puts the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector immediately before the story about the children. This parable concludes with Jesus teaching, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:14).

Practicing solidarity

I believe all the pieces of evidence I mention above come together to explain just what Jesus means when he tells us to receive the kingdom of God like children. To receive the kingdom of God as a child means thoroughly humbling yourself, both spiritually *and* materially, standing in solidarity with those whom society has deemed “less worthy” or unimportant.

Jesus says, “It is to such as these [children] that the kingdom of God

belongs” (Luke 18:16b). To whom does the kingdom of God belong? To those who are treated as objects and not as people. To those with no status or power. To refugees. To people of color in America who face oppression and discrimination. To victims of sexual violence and abuse. To those stuck in poverty and homelessness. To Christians facing violent persecution in other countries.

People in Jesus’ world generally believed that the rich, powerful and influential enjoyed the favor of God or the gods. The poor? The weak? The “losers” of society? They were under divine disfavor. At best, they were deserving of pity. At worst, they were deserving of scorn.

But Jesus proves this false. He came down from heaven, took the form of a slave, and suffered a shameful death on the cross. He set aside his privilege and identified himself with the lowest of the low so he might lift them up with him in the resurrection. And he calls upon his followers to join him (Philippians 2:3-13).

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