

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

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As we approached in the descending blackness, we could see waves of children coming across the fields. Many of them had walked a mile or two from their village to come watch a movie about Jesus under the starry African sky.

This scene played out many times during mission trips to remote areas of East Africa. Our team would work with local churches and invite villagers to gather in a field to view the “Jesus” film. On those nights, we drove the projection equipment to the designated site on dirt roads with no streetlights. One time, we were met head-on by a sea of children pouring in from all the nearby villages. The crowd was so thick that we could not even get out of the van.

Disciples and Children

In Mark 10, Jesus’ disciples turn away a crowd of people who had brought their children to Jesus: “And they were bringing small children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them” (Mark 10:13). Readers often assume that the disciples were callous toward the children. At first glance, it seems this way because Mark says that Jesus was “aroused in anger” (ἀγανακτέω, *aganakteō*) at the disciples for turning “them” away. Although Mark’s use of pronouns is slightly ambiguous, the disciples rebuked the *adults* who were bringing the children, not the children themselves. Nonetheless, the disciples get the blame—but their place in this story seems worse than it actually is.

In the ancient world, people did not hold young children (παιδίον, *paidion*) in high esteem. There were

many reasons for this. One is that the likelihood of a young child surviving was lower than we can imagine. While it is impossible to calculate child-mortality rates in the ancient world, most likely 50–60 percent of children did not reach adolescence (even the most conservative estimates put the figure at roughly 30 percent). Another reason is that children were not valued for *being children* in the ancient world. They had worth not as individuals, but only as part of the larger family. Children were put to manual labor as soon as possible, often by age three or four. Most lived in poverty or slavery. Of course, there were exceptions: male children born to wealthy families who spent money to educate them. This does not mean that parents in the ancient world did not love their children. They just loved them differently than parents do today.

The disciples were not so much callous as simply products of the world in which they lived. In the ancient world, things with little or no value—like poor, young children who probably wouldn’t make it into adulthood—were not to bother people of high value, like rulers and prophets. The Christian idea about the value of children—just for being children—that we are so accustomed to today, hadn’t yet become a cultural force. It was not unreasonable or uncaring if on one occasion the disciples stopped a crowd of adults from releasing their children on Jesus.

Children and Jesus

But this passage in Mark’s Gospel is not about the children. As is so often the case in Jesus’ ministry, he uses the circumstances around him as starting points for his teaching. In this case, Jesus takes the occurrence of the children coming to him to teach his followers about the kingdom of God.

To see this, we must read the story within the context of the rest of Mark’s Gospel. In 10:13 the disciples try to send the crowd of parents and children away. The disciples also try to do this with a large crowd in 6:36. In contrast, there are numerous occasions where needy crowds swarm around the disciples and Jesus, and the disciples do not object (3:20, 32; 4:1; 5:21, 24; 6:55; 9:15). The disciples also do not object at other times when Jesus heals children or hugs them (5:41; 9:20, 36). Most notably, *Jesus himself sends away or avoids crowds on numerous occasions* (1:45; 3:7; 4:35; 6:45; 8:9). These crowds probably contained many children.

Why then does Jesus become angry on this occasion when the disciples send the parents and children away? To illustrate a point about the kingdom that the disciples were having trouble grasping.

Jesus and Faith

As Mark tells it, after Jesus rebukes the disciples for not allowing low-value things (children) into his presence, he tells the disciples, “Let the small children come to me—don’t refuse them, because the kingdom of God is for ones such as these.” Even though Jesus himself turns crowds away at various points in his ministry, this particular crowd’s focus on bringing children prompts Jesus to teach the disciples about God’s kingdom.

The crux of the episode comes in 10:15: “Listen well to what I say to you: Whoever cannot receive the kingdom of God *as a young child* cannot enter into it.” Jesus alerts everyone to the importance of what he is about to say with the oft-repeated warning expression, “Listen well to what I say to you.” Because of the circumstances that Mark uses, readers often try to relate having faith in Jesus to images of innocent and cherubic young children. However, Jesus does not mean this in a literal way; instead, he uses figurative language to communicate the values of the kingdom.

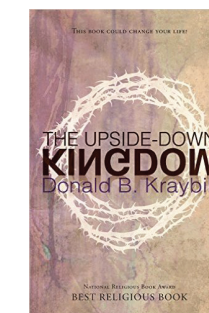
Jesus’ metaphor in 10:15 is intended to help his hearers—and the reader—understand that in order to pursue the kingdom they must be able to put aside any presumption of self-worth. They must recognize that they are actually low-value things and enter the kingdom without pretense, and only through faith. This is why Jesus says earlier that the willingness to receive a child in his name is the same as receiving Jesus himself (Mark 9:37; compare Luke 14:13).

What about the children? Jesus gathered them around him close—and having hugged them, putting his hands on them, he blessed them” (Mark 10:16). **B**

Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.



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