

Chapter 77: “Let the Little Children Come to Me”

Matthew 19:13–15

After narrating Jesus’ lengthy dispute with the Pharisees about the permanence of marriage, Matthew spotlights another interaction of Jesus that tells us more about our Savior’s understanding of the family. This time, the question centers around children. While Jesus’ disciples did not want their master to be bothered by these children, our Lord was adamant that the children must be brought to him. To justify this idea, he says something astonishing: “for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (v. 14). The kingdom of heaven belongs to children? The idea was astonishing in Jesus’ day, and it is outrageous in ours. Yet, Jesus here lays down an important command: *bring the little children to Jesus*.

Bring Little Children to Jesus (Matt. 19:13)

To transition into this section, Matthew uses the word “then.” While Matthew sometimes indicates the chronological connection more clearly (e.g., “immediately”; Matt. 14:22; “after six days”; Matt. 17:1), the word “then” does not tell us exactly how much time has passed since the interaction with the Pharisees on marriage and divorce. Instead, Matthew likely intends for us to see a more thematic connection made in two ways. First, the subject of children clearly follows from a discussion of marriage.¹ Second, Blomberg recognizes a terrific contrast between this passage and the previous passage: “There the powerful Pharisees were rebuffed; here relatively helpless children are embraced.”²

Matthew records that “children were brought” to Jesus (v. 13). The verb “were brought” is in the passive tense, and used elsewhere in Matthew to describe when the wise men brought gifts to Jesus (Matt. 2:11), the act of bringing an offering before the Lord (Matt. 5:23–24; 8:4) or how parents or friends brought their sick or demon-oppressed children and loved ones to Jesus to be healed (Matt. 4:24; 8:16; 9:2, 32; 12:22; 14:35; 17:16). Hagner, noting especially the bringing of sick to Jesus for healing, draws the conclusion that Matthew is therefore describing how “Parents brought their children (Luke [18:15] specifies βρέφη [*brephe*], ‘babies’) to be ‘blessed’ by Jesus (cf. Mark 10:16 for the verb). This is the point of the laying on of hands and the prayer.”³ Here, Matthew does not use the word for “babies,” but the word παιδία (*paidia*; same word that Jesus uses in v. 14) is in a diminutive form, meaning “little children.”⁴ Regarding the laying on of hands and prayer for a blessing, some have suggested that the parents were acting from superstition rather than faith. While

¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 719.

² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 295.

³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 552.

⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 486–87.

these parents likely did not have a fully developed faith, Lenski is correct that Jesus would have rebuked the parents himself if they had sought him for wrong, selfish purposes, rather than by faith (e.g., John 6:26).⁵

Yet, Jesus does *not* rebuke the parents for bringing their children to him. Rather, it is the disciples who rebuke “the people”—that is, the parents of the children.⁶ It may be important to remember that, in the context of the previous two sections, Jesus has been critiquing the traditional Jewish teachings and attitudes of that day toward forgiveness (Matt. 18:21) and marriage (Matt. 19:3, 7, 10). Here, Jesus’ disciples reflect their society’s typical cultural view where children were devalued. In the previous chapter, Jesus had pointed to a child as an object lesson to teach that those who humble themselves like children are greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:1–4). Here, the question revolves not around the one who “humbles himself like this child,” but around actual children.

Jesus is showing, therefore, that Jewish attitudes toward children (as exemplified in the actions of Jesus’ disciples) were less inclusive of children in the kingdom than Jesus was. This is not to say that those Jewish attitudes were uniquely wrong. Indeed, our own culture demonstrates an extraordinarily *more* negative view toward children in numerous ways: widespread abortion; purposeful childlessness among married couples; maternal surrogacy that rips children from the woman whose womb carried them and that treats children as commodities to be bought and sold; no fault divorce that has little regard for the wellbeing of children; in-vitro fertilization that creates multiple human embryos with the intention of discarding extras; placing children for adoption in the homes of homosexual couples (thus denying children a father or a mother); and encouraging children at very young ages to take psychological, pharmaceutical, and surgical interventions to transition from male to female, or vice versa. Compared to the Jewish attitudes toward children in Jesus’ day, our culture is intensely more culpable for our callous disregard of the needs of children.

Yet, there is an important theological principle in recognizing that Jesus’ kingdom is more inclusive of children than traditional Jewish views. Specifically, some Christians argue that the New Testament excludes the children of believers from the covenant until they profess faith in Christ. This view acknowledges that the children of the Jewish people were clearly included in the old covenant, but that the new covenant is exclusively spiritual, belonging only to those who have been born again to saving faith. Here, however, Jesus must correct those living under the old covenant by explaining that his kingdom belongs even to these little children. Thus, the (Jewish) disciples’ view of the kingdom was not too inclusive (wrongly including the children of believers), but too restrictive by wrongly excluding these infants and little children brought to Jesus by their parents. Calvin therefore observes that “Christ receives not only those who, moved by holy desire and faith, freely approach to him, but those who are not yet of age to know how much they need his grace.”⁷

Jesus Blesses Little Children (Matt. 19:14–15)

Against the disciples’ exclusion of children, Jesus’ words are remarkable: “Let the little children

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 744.

⁶ “The disciples ‘rebuked them’ (lit.): both the context and the synoptic parallels show that ‘them’ refers, not to the children, but to ‘those who brought them’ (NIV).” (Carson, “Matthew,” 475.)

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:389.

come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (v. 14). Since the Bible so often tells the stories of grown-ups, we must linger over this clear call from Jesus to the little children in our midst. Jesus insists that we must do all that we can help children to come to Jesus, and to do nothing to hinder children from coming to Jesus. Here we see the highest possible view of children, where Jesus goes so far as to insist that “to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

It is astonishing, then, to see Baptist commentators who are otherwise very reliable to avoid the implications of this clear teaching of Jesus. Craig Blomberg shifts the meaning of this text away from children and onto those who have a “childlike attitude”: “Such as these’ shows that all children are not automatically saved but rather all those of any age who come to God with a childlike attitude—recognizing their utter dependence on their Heavenly Father (as in 18:3–4).”⁸ More forcefully, D. A. Carson directly contradicts Jesus’ by insisting that the kingdom of heaven does *not* belong to little children: “Jesus does not want the little children prevented from coming to him, *not because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them*, but because the kingdom of heaven belongs to those like them (so also Mark and Luke, stressing childlike faith). Jesus receives them because they are an excellent object lesson in the kind of humility and faith he finds acceptable.”⁹

The reason that these otherwise faithful Christian teachers reject Jesus’ teaching on this point has to do with their theology of baptism. They believe that baptism is to be administered only to those who can give a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ. As mentioned earlier, they acknowledge that the infant children of believers were members of the old covenant, but they believe that membership in the new covenant is restricted only to those who are spiritually regenerate. Thus, they do not believe that children are members of the new covenant until those children knowingly put their faith in Jesus for salvation.

We must see, though, that this view requires them to contradict Jesus. While Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to little children, Baptists must say that the kingdom of heaven does *not* belong to little children, but only to those who are *like* children. Thus, they interpret Jesus to insist on letting children come to him in order to show that the kingdom of heaven belongs to everyone *except* children. It is certainly true that Jesus teaches that others enter the kingdom by becoming *like* children (Matt. 18:3), but this cannot mean that children themselves are excluded from the kingdom. Lenski, citing Johann Bengel, writes, “Bengel says that if the kingdom is ‘of such,’ then with a special right the children must be included. They are the model examples of the whole class. If we want to know the character of the class we must study the children (18:3).”¹⁰ France similarly writes that “Here, as in 18:2, it is literal children who focus the issue, but here too, as in 18:5, the use of ‘such’ rather than ‘these’ indicates that the thought is broader than the literal children who are present in the narrative setting.”¹¹

Indeed, the rest of the New Testament confirms that the new covenant is more inclusive of the children of believers than the old covenant had been.¹² In 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul urges believers to

⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 295.

⁹ Carson, “Matthew,” 475, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 744.

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 727.

¹² See Jacob D. Gerber, “The Better Promises of the New Covenant to the Children of Believers,” (June 19, 2019). <<https://jacobgerber.org/better-promises-new-covenant-children-of-believers/>>

remain with unbelieving spouses for the sake of the holiness of the children: “For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.” This is in stark contrast with the old covenant, where the believing spouse did not make the unbelieving spouse holy. Instead, the unbelieving spouse “profaned” the believing spouse:

[11] Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. [12] May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts! (Mal. 2:11–12)

The result of this profaned marriage was that the children were to be “cut off from the tents of Jacob” and from worshiping the Lord of hosts. Under the new covenant, however, Paul insists that the holiness of the believer secures the holiness of their children within the spiritually mixed marriage.

Indeed, this passage in Malachi may be in particular view for Matthew, since in the next verse, Malachi brings a second specification to uphold the charge that Judah has been faithless:

[13] And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. [14] But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. [15] Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. (Mal. 2:13–15)

This passage shows the logical connection between the previous section of Matthew (19:1–12) and this section. In both Malachi 2 and Matthew 19, the Lord condemns divorce, especially as it affects the children: “And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring” (Mal. 2:15). Whereas the old covenant excluded certain children from the covenant, Jesus has come to extend *stronger* covenant promises to the children of believers—which, by extension, includes a stronger motivation to remain married.

Still, we must make two clarifications while insisting, with Jesus, that the kingdom of heaven belongs to Jesus. First, this does not mean that this passage directly teaches the practice of infant baptism. Some have argued that the command “do not hinder” (μὴ κωλύετε; *mē kōlyete*) is a reference to the practice of baptism, since the same verb is used in two baptism texts: “And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What prevents [κωλύει; *kōlyei*] me from being baptized?’” (Acts 8:36). “Can anyone withhold [κωλύσαι; *kōlyesai*] water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts

10:47). Baptists obviously reject this view,¹³ but even someone like me who is convinced of infant baptism finds the connection unlikely (although perhaps not impossible). Nolland states a much better position when he rejects the view that “withhold” is a reference to infant baptism, but then writes, “This is not to say, however, that those who seek to formulate a theology and practice of baptism can afford to ignore this text. On the contrary, it must be considered a key text.”¹⁴ We do not practice infant baptism *because* of this text; however, infant baptism rests partially upon the foundation of this text.

Second, while children who are covenantally holy by virtue of even one believing parent have the God-given right to be baptized, those baptized children *must* close with Christ personally by faith. The Israelites had great privileges in the old covenant, especially by their circumcision, which was a sign and a seal that God imputes justifying righteousness to his people through their faith (Rom. 4:11). Our baptism, then, testifies to the same reality that circumcision did, so that Paul says that our baptism *is* a circumcision that God makes without hands to put off our flesh by burying us with Christ crucified and raising us up to new life with him (Col. 2:11–12). If so, then the warning Paul gives to unbelieving—but circumcised—Jews still applies, that your baptism will turn to unbaptism if you do not trust in Jesus Christ but instead continue in disobedience to the law of God (Rom. 2:25–27). So, Paul writes that “no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God” (Rom. 2:28–29). The privileges of the covenant do not end with the outward sign of baptism. Rather, the sign and seal of baptism are meant to lead you to repent from your sins and to trust in Jesus Christ personally for your salvation.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the connecting word “then” connect this passage with the previous passage (v. 13)? How does this connection set this teaching about children within the larger context of marriage and divorce? Who “brought” these little children to Jesus? What did these parents want from Jesus? Why do you think that the disciples rebuked the children? How was their view of the kingdom of heaven deficient?
2. What are some of the ways that our culture devalues and disregards children? In what ways do these negative attitudes about children within the wider culture affect the way that Christians sometimes think about children? What does Jesus think about children? How does his attitude challenge our own deficient views about children and about the nature of the kingdom of heaven?

¹³ e.g., Blomberg, who rejects the argument as “wholly implausible.” Yet, it must be noted that Blomberg overstates his position when he insists that “Neither water nor babies appear anywhere in this passage,” forgetting the parallel text where Luke 18:15 explicitly tells us that babies were present. (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 295–96.)

¹⁴ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 785.

3. What does Jesus mean when he demands that his disciples let the children come to him, and not to hinder them (v. 14)? Why does our Savior insist this about children? Why do some interpreters see the phrase “such as these” as referring to all kinds of people *other* than children? How does this passage relate to our understanding that children are included in the covenant and entitled to the sacrament of baptism?

4. How is the new covenant more inclusive of the children of believers than the old covenant? How do we see this greater inclusion of children by the words and actions of Jesus here, in contrast to those of the disciples? Beyond the practice of infant baptism, how else does our understanding of the place of children in the kingdom in our practices within the church? How has this passage challenged you to invest your life with a view toward Jesus’ valuation upon children?