

Commentary on Matthew 19:13-15

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JESUS AND THE CHILDREN. 19:13-15.

I. THE CONTEXT.

A. This Passage and the Preceding Passage.

Quite significantly, Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce is followed immediately by a passage recording his attitude toward children. The two passages taken together concern the family. By implication, this juxtaposition of passages teaches that one's response to the teaching of 19:1-12 will surely affect the lives of children, whether for good or for ill. Cf. 1 Cor 7:1-14, where the closing reference to the children's "holiness" on account of the believing parent (v. 14) implies that the child's loss of this protective covenantal shield (e.g. by the child's departing with the unbelieving partner) could prove to be very destructive for the child.

B. This Passage and the Following Passage.

The present passage is followed immediately by one about a young man (**neaniskos**, v. 20) and his attitude toward wealth and possessions. This juxtaposition speaks to the importance of nurturing the young and building into them the right kind of world view and values-system - not least for the purpose of shaping their thinking about and attitudes toward money and material things.

C. The Three Passages Together.

It is most instructive to ponder the interrelationships among these three passages, and the practical reasons for their being presented together. J. Jeremias calls this arrangement (found in both Mt and Mk) "a little catechism which instructed the churches how the disciples of Jesus should look on marriage, children, possessions" (Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, 50). Observe the kinship between Mt 19 and Eph 5:21-6:9. In addition to the (immediately evident) kinship between Eph 5:22-6:4 (husband and wife, parents and children) and Mt 19:1-15 (marriage, children), there is a parallel between Mt's story of the rich young man and Paul's teaching about the master-slave relationship. For money is unmistakably a major factor in determining relationships between employers and

employees (to use the appropriate language for our day and culture). Whether an employer or an employee is enslaved to wealth or enslaved to God (Mt 6:24), will likely be a decisive factor in determining how the employer and the employee relate to each other. In the former case, the relationship is certain to be hostile and destructive - particularly where both parties are slaves of Mammon. In the latter case, the relationship can be amicable and productive. See Richard J. Foster, Money, Sex & Power, especially on the interrelationships among these areas, on the activity of "the principalities and powers" in all three areas, and especially on the importance of viewing money not merely as a "medium of exchange" but as a "rival god" which (like the true God) calls for total allegiance. See further below on Mt 19:23-24.

II. THE APPROACH TO JESUS. 19:13.

A. The Parents and the Children.

"Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them" (v. 13a).

1. The age of the children. Matthew, like Mark, calls them not **paides** (plural of **pais**, "child"), but **paidia** (plural of **paidion**, the diminutive of **pais**), a term that can denote "very young children, infants" (BAGD, s.v. **paidion**, 1.). We cannot of course determine precisely when a child ceased to be a **paidion** and became a **pais** (Mt 11:16 e.g. speaks of **paidia** playing in the marketplace), and we must acknowledge considerable overlapping between the terms (BAGD include the instance of **paidion** in Mt 19:13 under the heading "child"). Yet we can affirm that the present group of children **at least included** infants. For note (1) the use of **brephē** (the plural of **brephos**, "baby, infant") in the Lukan parallel (18:15), and (2) the fact (reported by Mark alone, 10:16a) that Jesus "took them in his arms."

2. The motive of the parents. The parents' motive is reflected in the Babylonian Talmud, **Soph.** 18:5 (as quoted by Jeremias, Infant Baptism, 49): "It was a beautiful custom in Jerusalem to make the little children, boys and girls, fast on the fast-day (i.e. on the Day of Atonement), those who were a year old until daybreak, the twelve-year-olds till evening, and then to carry or lead them to the elders (i.e. the scribes) for them to bless them, strengthen (i.e. exhort) and pray for them, that they might one day attain to knowledge of the Torah and to good works."

B. The Disciples and the Children.

1. Whom did the disciples rebuke? "But the disciples rebuked **them** [**autois**]" (19:13b). According to one view (NIV; Carson, 420), the disciples rebuke the **parents**. In my judgment the objects of the disciples' rebuke are **the children themselves** (so Gundry, 384) or at least the parents **together with** the children (which might explain Mt's general pronoun "them"). For consider (1) that the subject of v. 13a is "little children," not "parents" (the latter are not directly mentioned in the passage, but only indirectly in the passive verb "were brought"), and (2) that in v. 14a Jesus rebukes the disciples for hindering the children's coming to him (note the active infinitive **elthein**, v. 14a, in contrast to the passive verb of v. 13a).

2. Why did the disciples rebuke them? For one or more of several reasons: (1) annoyance that Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is being delayed; (2) irritation over children who refuse to "stay in their place" and who interrupt an important theological discussion among "grown-ups" (cf. 19:1-12; Carson, 420); and (3) resentment that "Jesus should be treated as on a level with the scribes" (Jeremias, Infant Baptism, 49; cf. A. 2.) - i.e., with persons who stand under his censure (15:1-9).

III. THE BLESSING OF JESUS. 19:14-15.

A. View 1: Children as Models of Discipleship.

On this view the purpose of the present passage is essentially the same as 18:2-5, namely to present little children (the two passages have **paidion, -dia** in common) as examples of the way disciples are to behave. Carson comments: "Jesus does not want the little children prevented from coming to him (v. 14), not because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them, but because the kingdom of heaven belongs to those like them...: Jesus receives them because they are an excellent object lesson in the kind of humility and faith he finds acceptable" (p. 420).

Gundry does not exclude the young but insists that the "little children" are already knowledgeable disciples: "Praying for the children probably casts them in the role of young disciples, the youth of the church" (p. 383). He thinks that Matthew has deleted Mk 10:16a ("hugging them") "in order to cast the children as disciples old enough to understand rather than as infants or toddlers too young to have the understanding necessary for discipleship" (p. 384).

B. View 2: Children as Objects of Blessing.

I wish to argue, in opposition to View 1, that in this passage Jesus makes the little children **themselves** the objects of his blessing and includes the children **themselves** within the Kingdom of God. This is obviously not to exclude the motif of children as models of discipleship, but simply to say that this motif, which dominates 18:2-5, is not repeated here but **supplemented**.

1. Apart from the much-debated v. 14b ("for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these," NIV), the singular focus of this passage is upon children themselves. The sort of exhortation found in 18:3-4 (where Jesus challenges disciples to become like children) is totally absent from this passage. Moreover, the children's parents are mentioned only indirectly; attention is focused on their children, together with Jesus.

2. In that light, we come to v. 14b: "for [**gar**] the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these [**tōn toioutōn**]." Concerning the adjective **toioutos** (found here in the genitive plural), John Murray writes: "The usage of the New Testament will show...that the force of **toioutos** is not to institute a comparison but rather to specify a class, and the class specified is defined by the context" (Baptism, 64). According to this principle, the term as used in 19:14 clearly specifies the class as defined in the immediate context, namely the children who have come to Jesus (see the forceful arguments in Murray, 64-65, favoring this conclusion). This connection is strengthened by the "for" (**gar**) with which the clause of v. 14b begins. For an interpretation of the **toioutos** of 18:5 according to the principle enunciated by Murray, see my comments on 18:5. Murray himself takes 18:5 to refer to the child whom Jesus uses as a model, while I take it to refer to the disciple who has become humble like a child.

3. The above conclusions are confirmed by v. 15, which says that Jesus actually **placed his hands** on the children - an act which has no counterpart in 18:2-5. Unless this act signals actual blessing for the **children themselves** - i.e. if its purpose is merely to illustrate Jesus' blessing on adults who behave like children - then (if one may speak so) it is a misleading gesture. For the children are then not the real objects, but only the apparent objects of Jesus' blessing.

4. The above three points suffice (I believe) to establish the correctness of the second view. Yet we may note further that the present episode is textually separated from that of 18:2-5. We are now well acquainted with Matthew's fondness for topical arrangement of material. So, assuming that the main point of 19:13-15 is essentially the same as 18:2-5, it may be asked why Matthew did not join the two passages together. If it be answered that the material of 19:13-15 fits

more appropriately in its present context (namely between the passages about marriage and divorce and the rich young man respectively), then it is to be noted that the connections among these three passages make much better sense if the little children of the middle section are regarded **as real little children** and not merely as illustrations of adult disciples. Note further that Mt 19 closely follows Mk 10: in each case Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce is followed by the blessing of the children, then by the story of the rich young man. Accordingly, it is striking that Matthew omits Mk 10:15 from the middle section - the reason being that Matthew has already quoted that saying in 18:3. In other words, Matthew **treats separately** two points that Mark brings together - the blessing of children and an exhortation to adults to respond like children.

5. While the present passage makes no reference to the baptism of little children, it is noteworthy that the verb "hinder" (**kōluō**), v. 14, does appear in several baptismal contexts, namely Acts 8:36; 10:47; and 11:17 (cf. Mt 3:14, where the compound **diakōluō** appears). This suggests that the present passage provided a basis for (and, as used in Matthew's Church, actually reflected) the Church's later practice of infant baptism. Cf. Jeremias, Infant Baptism, 53-54, following Oscar Cullmann.