

Matthew 19:13-15

- the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as little children -

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Introduction

- ❖ It is a short story that gives room to the imagination, as we see Jesus embracing small children, parents standing at a distance and the disciples looking on with disdain, after being rebuked by Jesus.
- ❖ This picture doesn't answer the following questions.
 - Who are the people who brought the little children to Jesus? Were they their parents? Or perhaps other adults who accompanied the children?
 - Matthew doesn't tell the readers. All attention is focused on the disciples, the children and Jesus.
 - Why did the persons who brought the children to Jesus, want him to lay his hands upon them and pray for them?
 - It is a sign that they saw Jesus as a spiritual father. They didn't address Jesus with titles like "lord" (Mt 8:2; 8:6; 8:25; 9: 28), "Son of David" (Mt 9:27; 12:23; 20:30) or "Teacher" (Mt 12:38). That Jesus is the "Christ" must be kept silent (Mt 16:16, 20). Later, Jesus was designated as the prophet from Nazareth (Mt 21:11).
 - Why did the disciples rebuke those who brought the children to Jesus?
 - The previous story could give an indication. This was an adult question about divorce, marriage and the interpretation of the law (Mt 19:1-12). Were the disciples ashamed because Jesus said to them, "Not all can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. (...) The one who can accept this, must accept it"?
 - What does Jesus mean, when he says that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these"?

- There are different aspects of being a child:
 - as a stage in psychological, physical and social development; In the biblical context, there are only two stages: child – and adult. Nowadays this moment is celebrated by an official transition. A Jewish girl becomes a daughter of the law, a "bat mitsvah" at the age of twelve and a boy becomes a son of the law, a "bar mitsvah" at the age of thirteen.¹
 - An adult can behave like a child, childish behaviour, but this is not in view.
 - The relation to a father and a mother, whatever the age, one always remains a child in relation to parents.
 - In Matthew 19:13-15 Jesus wants the disciples to change their hearts and become a child of the Father (Mt 5:9; especially Mt 6).
- The emphasis is on the relational: faith, trust, love, obedience, honouring the Father.

❖ Remark:

- This passage cannot be used to support "infant baptism," nor can it be used to support a ceremony such as "Infant Presentation." Because:
 - "Infant Baptism" is not in view.
 - "Infant Presentation" is not in view either. Jesus was presented to the LORD (Lk 2:21-24) according to the law on the "consecration of the Firstborn" (Ex 13.1, 2, 12-13). "Infant Presentation" is not the same as "consecration of the Firstborn" and the children were not presented to the Lord.
- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Gospel of Matthew. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a stand-alone. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

Context

- ❖ Matthew 19 describes three encounters with Jesus:
 - (1) The Pharisees who tempted him about divorce (Mt 19:3-9);
 - The discussion with his disciples (19:10-12).
 - (2) The parents and their little children (19:13-15);

¹ For introductory information see: Wikimedia Foundation. (2024, April 15). *Bar and Bat Mitzvah*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar_and_bat_mitzvah

- The discussion with the disciples (19:13.b);
- The action of Jesus (19:14-15).
- (3) The young rich man who asked him how to get eternal life (Mt 19:16-24);
 - The discussion with the disciples (19:16-30).
- ❖ The pattern is the same in all three situations. The disciples respond from a human perspective, but Jesus responds from **God's perspective**:
 - If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry” (19:12).
 - Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those **to whom it has been given.**”
 - “The disciples rebuked those who brought them” (19:13).
 - Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for **the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.**”
 - “Who then can be saved?” (19:25).
 - Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but **with God all things are possible.**”

Form and structure

Background (Mt 19:1-12)	
<i>Setting:</i> (Mt 19:1, 2)	When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.
<i>Discussion with the Pharisees:</i> (Mt 19:3-12)	Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (...)
Jesus and his disciples – little children (Mt 19:13-15)	
<i>New Situation:</i> (Mt 19:13)	Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them.
<i>Jesus said:</i> (Mt 19:14)	Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."
<i>Sign of the kingdom:</i> (Mt 19:15)	When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

Children²

- ❖ Matthew 18:2-5: "He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth,
- ❖ **unless you change and become like little children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me."
 - Jesus identifies himself with the little children. Compare Matthew 25:34-40, where Jesus identifies himself with the needy.
- ❖ Old Testament:
 - Children are a gift from God (Gen 29:31-31:24).
 - Given the primacy of children, a favourite image was that of father, mother, and numerous children around a table (Ps 128:3–4).
 - and symbolically a guarantee of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. (Gen 12:1-3; Gen 15:1–3; Gen 17:17; 21:6).
 - They had a special role. Children were important in worship, prayer, and ritual (Ex 13:8, 14; Dt 4:9; 6:7):
 - "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deut 6:6, 7).
 - Regarding creation, the Psalmist declares that even little children can perceive and praise the wonders of God's universe (Ps 8:2).
 - The prophet Zechariah has a vision of the messianic era as a time of peace and joy when **"the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in them"** (8:5).
- ❖ New Testament (Matthew)
 - There are two central passages in which (little) children play an important role.
 - (1) "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'
 - He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said:

² Grassi, J. A. (1992, Vol. 1, pp. 904–907). *Child, Children*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.).

- 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'
- Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
- And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me''' (Mt 18:1-5; Mk 9:33-37; Lk 9:46-48).
 - Jesus identifies himself with the little children. Compare Matthew 25:34-40, where Jesus identifies himself with the needy.
 - Status seemed to be very important among the disciples. They needed to change their thoughts and hearts, and become like little children:
 - Compare Matthew 5:3 and 5:20.
- (2) Matthew 19:13-15.
 - Compare Mark 10:13-16:
 - "People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them."
- See also Matthew 11:25: "At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.'"
 - In Matthew 21:15, children were shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David" and Jesus quoted Psalm 8:2, while he was rebuking the Jewish leaders.

Kingdom of Heaven³

- ❖ The Kingdom is the core of the message of Jesus Christ.
 - The term "kingdom" occurs fifty-five times in Matthew's Gospel: thirty-two times in the phrase "kingdom of heaven(s)", nine times as "the kingdom", three times in the phrase "kingdom of God", three times as the Father's kingdom, twice as the Son of Man's kingdom, once as Jesus' kingdom.
- ❖ The ministries of John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples are introduced with the same proclamation: "The kingdom of heaven is near!" (Mt 3:2; 4:8; 10:7). Matthew summarizes

³ Green, J. B. (2013, p. 473–475). *Kingdom of God/Heaven*. In J. B. Green, J. K. Brown, & N. Perrin (Eds.).

Jesus' message with the phrase "the good news of the kingdom" (Mt 4:23; 9:35), and Jesus uses the same phrase to refer to missionary proclamation (Mt 24:14).

- His deeds are manifestations of the heavenly kingdom, for instance, his healing activities and the casting out of demons.
- This mission is extended to the whole world (Mt 28:19).
- ❖ The presentation of God as the heavenly Father and God's kingdom as the heavenly kingdom contrasts earthly kings and kingdoms, especially when the devil shows Jesus "all the worldly kingdoms" (Mt 4:8).
- ❖ The kingdom is "of heaven" in terms of its origin and attributes. This kingdom reveals God's mercy and righteousness and especially his wisdom, which is revealed to little children (Mt 11:25).

Exposition

Contrasts

- ❖ As stated above, this short narrative is part of three encounters with Jesus, each narrative follows the same pattern:
 - People come to Jesus with a question.
 - The disciples react.
 - Jesus teaches the disciples.
- ❖ There is a difference, while all other people are actively involved, the Pharisees, the disciples, the young man, the children are passive and they are held up as examples.
- ❖ The intentions and reactions are important:
 - The Pharisees approached Jesus with a **negative intention** ("to test him"; Mt 19:3).
 - The disciples **didn't accept** the word of Jesus (Mt 19:10-12).
 - Little children were brought to Jesus with a **positive intention** ("to place his hands on them; Mt 19:13).
 - The disciples **rebuked** those who brought them (Mt 19:13).
 - A young man **asked** Jesus about getting eternal life (Mt 19:16). "**He went away** sad, because he had great wealth" (Mt 19:22).
 - The disciples were greatly astonished. It **was not easy** for them also to accept this word of Jesus (Mt 19:23).
- ❖ In all three narratives, Jesus requires a radical change of heart from his disciples:
 - obedience to the Law (Mt 19:9);
 - becoming like little children (Mt 19:14);

- selling of all possessions, giving to the poor and following Jesus (Mt 19:21).
- ❖ A tentative conclusion could be that small children, because they are dependent, were not bothered by all kinds of religious disputes, and doubts, were curious and were not bothered by wealth and possessions.
 - They are receptive to divine revelation (Mt 11:25).
 - In this sense, they are comparable to:
 - “the poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3);
 - “the pure in heart (Mt 5:8).

Verse 13-15

- ❖ **“Then”** is a marker of transition. The scene changes. The Pharisees left, and adults with children enter the scene.
 - It marks also an abrupt transition after Jesus had said: "For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. **The one who can accept this should accept it**" (Mt 19:12).
- ❖ **“little children” = “παιδίον”**. Nothing is said about their age. In other instances, reference is made to age:
 - Moses, as a child, at the age of about three months (Hb 11:23);
 - Jesus probably at the age of two years or younger (Mt 2:13-16);
 - A girl at the age of twelve (Mk 5:4-42).
 - Jesus refers to children singing at the marketplace (Mt 11:16).
 - Matthew doesn't inform us about the age of the children. These examples indicate a range from the very young to the twelve-year-olds.
- ❖ **“were brought to Jesus for him.”** Again, Matthew doesn't inform us by whom the children were brought to Jesus. The focus is on the children.
- ❖ **“to place his hands on them and pray for them.”** In Matthew 19:2 the reader is informed that “large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.” They asked for prayer.
 - **“pray” = “προσεύχομαι”: to petition God, pray.**⁴ Prayer is directed to God as Father: “But when you pray, (...) **pray to your Father**, who is unseen” (Mt 6:6). “This, then, is how you should pray: **‘Our Father in heaven.’**” (Mt 6:9). Jesus addressed God as “my Father” (Mt 26:42).
 - This will be a prayer with confidence: “how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Mt 7:11). The adults who

⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 879).

bring the children to Jesus have confidence that his prayer will be powerful and effective (Jn 5:16).

- The people recognized Jesus as a prophet (Mt 16:14) and as a teacher (Mt 19:16).

❖ **“But the disciples rebuked those who brought them”**

- **“rebuke” = “ἐπιτιμᾶω”**: 1. **to express strong disapproval of someone, rebuke, reprove, censure** also *speak seriously, warn* **to prevent an action** or bring one to an end.⁵
- Why did they do so? We don't know. Perhaps, they felt that the situation was not fitting after they had a discussion with Jesus about marriage, divorce and the law of God. One might categorize these as typical adult questions.
- Had the disciples forgotten what Jesus has taught them in Matthew 18:3, 4: “And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, **unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’”

❖ **“Jesus said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them”**

- **“hinder” = “κωλύω”**: **to keep something from happening, hinder, prevent, forbid.**⁶
- Hindering someone to come to Jesus or to enter the Kingdom of Heaven was a grave mistake or even a sin.
 - Compare the following woe: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to” (Mt 23:13).
 - Here, Jesus doesn't pronounce a woe but uses the opportunity for profound teaching. It is easy to say: "unless you change and become like little children" (Mt 18:3). But how can a grown-up, an adult, an old man, change himself?

❖ **“for the kingdom of heaven”**

- See for the **“kingdom of heaven”** above.

❖ **“belongs to such as these.”**

- See Hebrews 2:13: “Here am I, and the children God has given me.” (Compare Isaiah 8:16). There is a new relationship: “sons of God” (Mt 5:9). And the relation between a teacher and his followers is also described in these terms: “dear children” (1 Jn 2:18; 3:7). Christ calls his disciples also children (Jn 21:5; NIV translates “friends”).

⁵ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 384).

⁶ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 580).

- “such as these” This is a call to change the heart, not to be bothered by religious disputes, not to reprimand adults who bring little children to Jesus, and not to worry about wealth.
 - “This teaches humility, by which is meant lack of concern for worldly status: to be childlike is to be without power or position.”⁷
- Jesus speaks here with authority. See also Matthew 7:29. He is opening the door to the kingdom of heaven.
 - “Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me” (Mt 18:5).
 - See also Matthew 25:40: “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of **the least of these brothers of mine**, you did for me.’”
 - Jesus identifies himself with the vulnerable people: the poor in spirit (Mt 5:3), the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the prisoner, the sick (Mt 25:35, 36), and a child. He shows the love of the Father for the needy and the little ones.
- Matthew 11:25-27 helps to explain:
- "At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, **Father**, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and **revealed** them to **little children**. Yes, **Father**, for this was your good pleasure. “All things have been committed to me by my **Father**. No one **knows** the Son except the **Father**, and no one **knows** the **Father** except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses **to reveal** him.
 - The following relation is important: **Father** – the Son – little children (those) and Jesus, as the Son identifies himself with a little child.
 - This relation is marked by **revelation** and **knowledge**. Note also John 14:8, 9: “Philip said, ‘Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.’ Jesus answered: ‘Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”
- ❖ **“When he had placed his hands on them”** Compare Mark 10:16: "And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them." Mark is more elaborate. Matthew is more succinct. Succinctness leaves room for a wider interpretation. First an overview.
 - **“place”** hands on = “**ἐπιτίθημι**”: *lay/put upon*⁸
 - as a sign that the gift of healing was transferred (Mt 9:18; Mk 6:5)

⁷ Davies, W. D., & Allison, D. C., Jr. (2004, Vol. 3, p. 32)

⁸ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 384).

- as a sign that the “the holy Spirit” was given (Ac 8:18; 9:17; 19:6);
- as a sign of “ordination”, the gift of responsibility (Ac 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim 5:22);
 - the gift of “preaching and teaching” (1 Tim 4:13-15), as a gift of God (2 Tim 1:6)
- as part of the instruction given to new believers (Hb 6:2).
- These meanings, appropriate in each case, are too narrow. As a sign and teaching that the "kingdom of heaven" belongs to such as these.
 - They receive more than was expected and asked for. Jesus reveals himself as a father, **he reveals the Father** (Jn 14:8, 9).
- ❖ **“he went on from there.”**
 - The narrative enters into a new scene at a different location and a new encounter.

Application

- ❖ Remark:
 - Preach this story in the context of Matthew 18:1-5 and Matthew 19:1-26.
 - Retell the story vividly in your context.
 - Ask yourself what the position of children is in society, the family and the church.
 - Do as a preacher what Jesus did: pray for them and lay your hands on them.
 - Luz writes: “In the perspective of our text I would like first of all to encourage our churches to include children, not only in separate rooms and on separate occasions but also precisely in our main corporate worship—and to include them not as passive participants who it is hoped will keep quiet but as persons who *as children* help shape our worship and make it more spontaneous, lively, and in a positive sense perhaps somewhat more chaotic.”⁹
- ❖ Focus on the message: **“for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”**
 - Jesus calls for a change of heart. What change do you need? How can you become like a child, a child of God?
 - A child indicates a stage in development, this stage is transitional. A child is also in relation, which is perpetual. Becoming like a child means receiving a new relationship with God as Father:

⁹ Luz, U. (2001, p. 507).

- “Yet to all who received him (Christ), to those who believed in his name, **he gave the right to become children of God**— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (Jn 1:12, 13).

❖ Glorify Christ

- His authority, his wisdom, his love for children!
- He reveals the heavenly Father! See also Matthew 11:25-27.

❖ Glorify God as Father

- His Kingdom (kingdom of heaven);
- His Fatherly care (Mt 6).

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