

Children: Gift and Model

Devotional Reading: Psalm 8

Background Scripture: Matthew 18:1–6; Mark 9:36–37, 42; 10:13–16;
Luke 2:1–20

Mark 9:36–37, 42

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

⁴² “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

Mark 10:13–16

¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.



Key Text

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

—Matthew 10:15

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 2: Fulfilling Our Obligations to Family and Community

Lessons 5–8

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Jesus' interactions with children in Mark 9 and 10.
2. Assess daily habits against the backdrop of Jesus' invitation to become "like children."
3. Repent of ways he or she has been like the disciples, rebuking (even internally) the "least of these."

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Role Models
- B. Lesson Context: Historical
- C. Lesson Context: Children

I. Jesus and a Child (Mark 9:36–37, 42)

- A. Welcoming, Part 1 (vv. 36–37)
Childlike Trust
- B. Warning, Part 1 (v. 42)

II. Disciples and Children (Mark 10:13–16)

- A. Welcoming, Part 2 (vv. 13–14)
- B. Warning, Part 2 (vv. 15–16)
Messy Kingdom

Conclusion

- A. Greatness Is Childlikeness
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Role Models

"Being a role model is the most powerful form of educating," said John Wooden, a well-known and successful NCAA basketball coach. "Modeling" is the process of teaching skills and behaviors through observable actions and imitation. It is more than being told how to do something; consider that "actions speak louder than words." Therefore, role models positively influence our lives by sharing their wisdom, knowledge, and experience through observational learning. They live alongside us and teach by demonstrating exemplary attitudes, behaviors, skills, and habits. A role model can make a big difference in a young, impressionable life.

In today's text, Jesus speaks and models his lesson to the disciples. As the most significant role model in history, we seek to learn and imitate his values and ways.

B. Lesson Context: Historical

Our text lands between Peter's confession of Jesus, "Thou art the Christ" (Mark 8:29), and the triumphal entry (11:1–10). Sandwiched between these events are clarifying motifs defining God's kingdom as upside down and backward to natural human instinct. Examples of these motifs are the high cost of discipleship (10:21–22), the difficulties of wealth (10:24–31), and a redefinition of greatness (10:36–45). Throughout this section, Jesus exalts the weak and lowly while humbling the powerful and proud.

Just prior to today's text, Jesus and his disciples traveled the 25 miles between Caesarea Philippi and Capernaum (Mark 8:27; 9:33). Caesarea Philippi was a town in the hill country at the base of Mount Hermon. Capernaum was a small fishing village that Jesus used as the home base of his ministry on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:13). Capernaum is mentioned in all four Gospels and named more than any other town in the New Testament except Jerusalem. It is where the centurion asked for Jesus' help and where Jesus healed the paralytic who was dropped through the roof (8:5; Mark 2:1–12). In contrast,

Scripture mentions Caesarea Philippi only twice: in Matthew 16:13 and its parallel in Mark 8:27.

C. Lesson Context: Children

In the Greco-Roman world of the first century AD, children held little significance. Adults viewed them as lacking reason and requiring training. The aim of their training was to learn their parents' business and duties. Their value was in their contribution to the family. In the extreme, children were considered property—to be nurtured or disposed of as the head of household determined. The same was true in Jewish households, but God also taught his people to consider children as a blessing (Psalm 127:3–5). God instructed parents to teach Israel's faith to their children and train them properly in behavior and wisdom (Deuteronomy 11:19; 31:12–13; Proverbs 22:6). Still, they had little power or status.

I. Jesus and a Child

(Mark 9:36–37, 42)

Today's passage begins with the disciples settling into their lodging for the night. As they do so, Jesus confronts them, asking about a dispute. The disciples are ashamed and do not answer. But of course, Jesus knows their argument was about status (Mark 9:33–34). Jesus replies to their concealed debate by teaching that those who want to be first must be last and servants of all (9:35). Then Jesus proceeds to teach through a practical demonstration. (Matthew 18:2–6 and Luke 9:47–48 are parallel passages to the first segment of our lesson.)

A. Welcoming, Part 1 (vv. 36–37)

36. He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them,

Jesus begins his illustration by bringing a *child* into the room and situating him where all 12 disciples can see. Jesus' unusual actions do not stop there. He proceeds to embrace the child as a father would, a detail not mentioned in the parallel texts of Matthew 18:2 and Luke 9:47. Jesus physically models the verbal point he is about to make, teaching through "an enacted parable."

What Do You Think?

Do you learn best by reading/hearing verbal instructions, watching someone demonstrate, or trying things yourself?

Digging Deeper

Why do you think modeling is more effective than telling someone what to do? Share examples of modeling.

37a. "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me;

This verse is essential for understanding true discipleship. There is a relationship between how believers see people, accept and serve them, and the welcoming of Jesus himself.

The 12 disciples and Jesus are most likely conversing in Aramaic, the everyday conversational language of first-century Jews and a later version of Hebrew (Mark 5:41; 15:34; John 1:42; Acts 21:40; 22:2; etc.). In Aramaic, the word for "child" is the same as the word for "servant." Therefore, Jesus' illustration points toward acceptance of the young, childlike, and lowly in social status.

Jesus begins two sequences with this verse. One has a positive outcome, and the other has a negative result. The positive sequence begins with those willing to receive both Jesus and children. As Jesus adds words to his provocative gesture, he calls on his *name*, expressing his authority as king. What Jesus offers here is not a general maxim of life apart from any other belief or truth. Instead, he specifically connects a particular outlook on life to following him. When one submits to Jesus as Lord, there is an expectation of inclusion, unity, and a warm welcome for all. Jesus is doing something beyond merely affirming the humane impulse to honor children. He is redefining fundamental values essential to life in God's kingdom. Because Jesus is King, His followers must pursue a new way of thinking and acting that points away from status-seeking and toward radical inclusion of all people regardless of rank.

37b. "and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

The positive sequence continues. To *welcome* Jesus is to receive the one who *sent* him—the

heavenly Father. Jesus' words expand the disciples' view in a sort of chain reaction. When believers welcome the poor and humble, they act in warm hospitality toward the Lord himself. When they embrace Jesus, they mysteriously also receive the Father. Equating the receipt of Jesus with receiving the one who sent him reflects a shared purpose of the Father and Son. The three distinct persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are one in divine nature and exist together in constant relationship with mutual submission. Truly, there is no greater glory than theirs!

Yet, throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus personally models lowliness. The 12 disciples' argument about their relative positions of greatness indicates that they don't yet understand—they don't get it. Our God possesses unequalled authority but reaches down in love for the lowly and unworthy. To undeniably know God and belong to God, we must follow Jesus' modeling and humbly extend the gospel message to everyone, just as he does (Matthew 25:34–40; 28:19–20). When we do, we reflect the values of his kingdom.

The parallel texts of Matthew 10:40–42 and Luke 9:48 expand on the cause and effect of believers' welcoming actions. Matthew teaches that heavenly reward comes for those who serve the poor and needy. Luke emphasizes Jesus' perspective that to be great, one must be willing to serve.

What Do You Think?

What does Jesus mean when he talks about welcoming people in his name?

Digging Deeper

How do we actively welcome children, immigrants, the poor, and the needy in our communities?

Childlike Trust

Our daughter loves swings. We cherish a framed picture of her swinging on a playground as a preschooler. The sun is shining on her face, and there is wonder in her eyes. Her expression holds no worry, stress, or fear of the future. She is smiling as though everything is right with the world. The picture conveys trust. As only a child can, she holds full confidence that all is well.

Playfulness comes with childlike trust. When there is nothing to fear, joy has room to grow uninhibited. Unfortunately, for many adults, the worries and cares of life choke out the space for delight, trust, and joy to flourish. Jesus said his kingdom belongs to those who approach it like children.

When was the last time you surrendered your worries to the Lord? When was the last time you let childlike, playful joy overtake you? Does wonder characterize your spiritual life? How can you become more childlike in your approach to the things of God? —B. R.

B. Warning, Part 1 (v. 42)

42. “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

This section moves into the negative sequence. As Jesus holds the child in his arms, he pronounces a dire warning. Those who cause the small, weak, or vulnerable to get tripped up spiritually face severe judgment. The Greek word translated *stumble* in this verse holds connotations of entrapment. In other contexts, it refers to interfering with faith in Jesus, prompting someone to give up on faith, or causing a person to sin (Romans 14:13–21; 1 Corinthians 8:13). The word is repeated several times in the verses following this one to emphasize how important it is to remove roadblocks from the path of faith (Mark 9:43, 45, 47). It warns the disciples to keep the way to Jesus clear.

A more significant issue to which this verse is attached is Jesus' aim at peaceful camaraderie in shared ministry (Mark 9:50). We recall that the specific concern running through the conversation is an incorrect focus upon power and status that leads to argument and posturing (9:33–34). All those turning to Jesus, speaking out in his name, and serving for his sake are not to be hindered or rejected (9:38–41). He calls for a straight and open path to him for all who desire to come.

Jesus compares blocking someone's approach to him with having a *millstone* hung around one's *neck*. This shocking illustration depicts weighty judgment. By its very nature, the image causes us to

stop and consider the consequences of our actions. A millstone is a large, round stone disk on which grain is ground into flour. It has a hole carved in the center so that it may be rotated upon a stationary stone underneath. This allows the grain between the stones to be crushed and ground.

A millstone represents a weight far more than any human can hope to carry. To be *thrown into the sea* with a millstone around one's neck means certain death by drowning. By most estimations, not many things are worse than this consequence, yet Jesus states this idea is *better* than being a stumbling block!

Jesus continues, suggesting that anything that prohibits the disciples from following him must be radically removed from their lives (Mark 9:43–50). He uses hyperbolic examples like cutting off their hands or feet if they cause them to stumble, or even gouging out their eyes (9:43, 45, 47). Jesus' reasoning is that of free entrance into God's kingdom, a clear path toward eternal life, rather than the unpalatable alternative of finding oneself in hell (9:47–48).

What Do You Think?

How does hyperbole (overstatement or exaggeration) assist in teaching a difficult concept?

Digging Deeper

Where else does Jesus use hyperbole? Make a list of examples.



Visual for Lesson 7. Display this visual as you ask volunteers to share what they can learn from the faith of a child.

Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.

When we read that Jesus' *disciples rebuked* those who brought him *children* for blessing, we may wonder whether the word *disciples* refers only to the original Twelve or if it includes others who also travel with Jesus (Mark 3:13–19). The New Testament uses the word *disciples* both ways (compare Matthew 27:57; Mark 8:34; Acts 6:2). The distinction is evident in places where the Twelve are designated as "apostles" (examples: Mark 6:30; Luke 6:13). Mark 10:32 uses the term "they" for 3 different groups: "the disciples," those "who followed," and "the Twelve."

The Greek term utilized here for the word *children* often refers to preteens, anyone who has not yet entered puberty. The age range is rather broad since Matthew 2 uses it for the infant Jesus, and Mark 5:39–42 uses the same word for a 12-year-old girl. No matter the age of their children, parents naturally want God's best for them. So, parents approach Jesus and the Twelve, asking that Jesus touch their children. The action reminds us of kingly and rabbinical blessings where the leader places his hands on the child's head and speaks a benediction (see Genesis 48:12–20). Perhaps, too, they heard the news of Jairus' daughter and the power transferred to the hemorrhaging woman by touching Jesus' garment (Mark 5:22–42).

The disciples presume to decide who gets access to Jesus and who doesn't. The Greek word

II. Disciples and Children

(Mark 10:13–16)

As Mark 10 opens, Jesus and his disciples leave Capernaum and enter the region of Judea to the south. They cross the Jordan River, and Jesus ministers to those in Perea. Crowds begin to gather, and Jesus teaches them (Mark 10:1). Mark 10:10 mentions Jesus returning to "the house" with his disciples and continuing to teach them. Matthew 19:13–15 and Luke 18:15–17 are parallel passages to this segment of our lesson text.

A. Welcoming, Part 2 (vv. 13–14)

13. People were bringing little children to

translated *rebuked* here occurs nine times in Mark's Gospel. It shows up in this passage, used by the disciples, but Jesus also reproves evil spirits with it (Mark 1:25; 9:25). He uses it to strictly order people to keep to themselves the knowledge of who he is or what he has done (3:12; 8:30). Jesus reprimands the very wind and waves with it, and they cease (4:39). Back and forth, Peter and Jesus each use the word after Jesus teaches that he must suffer, be killed, and rise again after three days (8:31–33). Finally, when a blind beggar tries to get Jesus' attention, a crowd uses the term to silence him (10:48). In all cases, the use of the word is intended to change and/or prevent something. Perhaps the disciples saw themselves as protecting Jesus' time and efforts. Even though they've learned from him for three years, they still don't "get it"!

What Do You Think?

Why did the disciples criticize those who brought children to Jesus?

Digging Deeper

What do you think parents hoped Jesus' touch would do for their children?

14. 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."

Jesus was likely just a short distance away and saw everything. The text describes Jesus' reaction as much displeased, *indignant*, or angry. The word translated *indignant* is used only three times in the Gospel of Mark. Here is the first instance, and the second involves the disciples' extreme displeasure at the request of James and John for the most powerful places in Jesus' kingdom (Mark 10:41). The third instance is Mark 14:4, which describes a reaction to the woman who breaks the alabaster jar of ointment on Jesus' head. Putting all three together, we get a picture of what upsets or angers people. Jesus is irritated at an attitude that seems to value one person over another. The other two instances focus on earthly values: status and money. Jesus wants his disciples to see that the wrong priorities work against the values of *the kingdom of God*.

The disciples find themselves countermanded.

Jesus' chastisement is sharp. He expresses the correction both positively and negatively for emphasis. Positively, he instructs the disciples to *let* the *children come* to him. The term *let* here means to "allow." Then he says, *do not hinder them*. This saying is framed negatively: do not keep these children away—because *the kingdom* belongs to them.

Why does God's kingdom belong to people who are like children? Because those who bring no status or standing as they come to God are ready to receive his kingdom as a gift. In vulnerability, they come to their provider with open hands and hearts.

B. Warning, Part 2 (vv. 15–16)

15. "Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Jesus asks his disciples to pay close attention: Entrance into *the kingdom of God* is not granted through power and prestige but rather by becoming *like a child* in some sense. Worldly perspectives place a premium on earning things. Children are unable to do much of that, but they are good at receiving gifts! Childlike delight, gratitude, and open arms are some attitudes to have when receiving the kingdom of God.

Thus, Jesus continues to shift the disciples' conceptualization of status, procurement, and belonging. Jesus speaks the phrase *the kingdom of God* 14 times in the Gospel of Mark. The repetition indicates its importance. In this instance, Jesus teaches that no one can do God favors in exchange for entry into his place of dominion. Instead, we all must come like vulnerable, humble children who need provision (Matthew 7:9–11). Those clinging to the illusion of their own status will not enter God's kingdom (Mark 10:23–26). But those who receive the kingdom as a gift will enter it by Jesus' compassionate grace.

What Do You Think?

What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God like a little child?

Digging Deeper

How can we be childlike in faith without being childish?

16. And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

The discourse ends with Jesus repeating his point yet again through action. As he did in Mark 9:36, Jesus takes the children into his *arms*. His embrace both blesses them and powerfully communicates complete inclusion and love. The act of blessing by the laying on of hands began way back in Genesis with Israel's ancestors (example: Genesis 48:9, 13–16). Consider the words of Numbers 6:24–26, “The LORD bless you, and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; The LORD turn his face toward you, and give you peace.” The Lord shone upon these children with presence, touch, and speech. His words and actions together expressed an emphatic promise that those who have the outlook of children belong in the kingdom of God.

Messy Kingdom

When I was a child, my parents ran a bus route that picked up inner-city children for church on Sunday mornings. Dozens of kids piled onto the bus, and we whisked them away to Sunday school and children's church. We took them home too. The aftermath on the bus always shocked me. Kids left clothing, Sunday school papers, gum, candy wrappers, and blankets behind when they got off the bus. And church classrooms held much of the same. The fact is that kids are messy.

We all come to Jesus with our messes too. Regardless, he welcomes us with open arms. It is easy to act like the disciples, attempting to “shield” Jesus from the messiest among us. But Jesus doesn't need protection; he welcomes all who come to him. Our messes don't scare him. Have you held back, afraid to approach Jesus with your mess? Have you blocked others from approaching him with their messes? In what ways might we demonstrate Jesus' love and welcome to all? —B. R.

Conclusion

A. Greatness Is Childlikeness

Culture teaches us that the “good life” is for the smart, powerful, and accomplished. This concept is a constant refrain heralded by academia, work

environments, media, and social circles. Even our children express this outlook—bragging about how good they are at something, how well they do in school, or how much bigger they are than younger siblings. This behavior points to social and cultural values that promote competition and comparison to determine who's in and who's not. Jesus' point is quite the opposite.

Jesus teaches a nonhierarchical mindset among his followers. He challenges his disciples to recalibrate their values and embrace a new kingdom mindset. Jesus encourages unity, service, and childlike faith. He calls his people to accept entry into his kingdom with the delight of a child receiving a gift. To be sure, there are childish attitudes and actions we must avoid, correct, or otherwise put behind us (1 Corinthians 13:11; 14:20; Ephesians 4:14; Hebrews 5:13–14; 1 Peter 2:2). Knowing what those are and how to grow beyond them while honoring and embracing Jesus' viewpoint is our continuing challenge.

How might you adjust your goals, vantage points, and perceptions to better align with Jesus' directives? In what ways might you embrace childlikeness, vulnerability, innocence, and trust on a day-to-day basis?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for welcoming us into your kingdom as you welcomed the little children. Teach us to depend on you as a child depends on an adult. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The kingdom of God belongs to the childlike.

How to Say It

Aramaic	<i>Air-uh-may-ik.</i>
Caesarea Philippi	<i>Sess-uh-ree-uh</i> <i>Fih-lip-ple or</i> <i>Fil-ih-pie.</i>
Capernaum	<i>Kuh-per-nay-um.</i>
centurion	<i>sen-ture-ee-un.</i>
Deuteronomy	<i>Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.</i>
Perea	<i>Peh-ree-uh.</i>