

Why did Jesus desire children to come before Him?

Children play a prominent role in Jesus' teachings to His disciples. When the disciples discuss who is the greatest among them, Jesus takes a child in the presence of the disciples to teach them the meaning of the "greatest":

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, **unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.** (Matt 18:1-5)

In Matthew's account, where the disciples ask Jesus who's the greatest, Jesus responds with an emphasis on faith, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." While He does not define faith in the context of children, Jesus uses the attitude and social status of a child to upend the disciples' notion of faith and greatness.

Jesus elaborates further on the notion of greatness by indicating that "whoever takes the lowly position of this child" "welcomes one such child in my name" and "welcomes Me." Responding to the implications of division caused by pride concerning the disciples' egotistical discussion of who's the greatest, Jesus highlights the primacy of agape among Believers, to welcome each other, which would later be a new commandment (John 13:34).

They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, "**Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.**" (Mark 9:33-37)

An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "**Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.**" (Luke 9:46-48)

Mark and Luke's record another moment when the disciples discuss among themselves who's the greatest. Jesus' response to this event was slightly different; He does not make a reference about the disciples' faith as in Matthew 18:3, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus indicates that anyone who desires to be "first shall be last" and "servant of all"; instead of the greatest being served by others, it is the greatest serving everyone else.

What the child represents is not clear. In Matthews account, the child represented a Believer; but, it is a bit ambiguous in Mark and Luke.

If the child represented a non-Believer, Jesus' message of service may be placing an emphasis on evangelism. However, because pride causes division among His followers, it is more likely that Mark and Luke see the child representing a Believer. Moreover, as an extension of Matthew's account, whoever welcomes another Believer welcomes God the Father.

Note carefully that without Matthew's account portraying the child as representing a Believer, it would be easy to misunderstand Mark and Luke's account. Pride is the primary cause of division among Believers today.

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Perhaps the most significant use of children as a teaching example is when Jesus is teaching about the attitude to faith:

Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, **“Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”** After laying His hands on them, He departed from there. (Matt 19:13-15)

And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, **“Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.”** And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them. (Mark 10:13-16)

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, **“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”** (Luke 18:15-17)

In these three passages, Jesus speaks of receiving “the kingdom of God like a child” as a reference to the attitude of a child; Jesus is not speaking of a child like faith. Because children have complete trust in their parents / adults, they unquestioningly obey and follow their direction.

It is in this context of a child believing and trusting the word of their parents that Jesus draws a parallel and synonymous meaning to believing in Him and receiving the kingdom of God. For the Old Testament Believer, this was not incompatible; receiving Jesus was not receiving Him, but receiving the One who sent Him.

In using children to teach about the right attitude towards faith, Jesus is criticizing the problems He sees in adults. Despite observing and hearing Jesus’ miraculous works, Jesus’ public testimony, the testimony of John the Baptist, and the testimony of the Old Testament, the Jews rationalize away the facts that establish Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God (John 5:30-47).

At that very time He rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit, and said, “I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that **You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.** Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” (Luke 10:17-22)

Faith has an objective basis on facts. Faith is 1) a belief in something real and true and 2) a trusting confidence in that truth.