

Prayer

How wonderful it is to be blessed by you, Lord God of incredible might and power. We cannot comprehend the full extent of Your love, and we cannot plumb the depths of Your grace or attain the heights of Your awesome majesty; but we can know that You are right beside us all the time! What a mystery! We praise You, Lord God; Alleluia!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Land

Pray for the land on which your house is built. Ask the Lord to bless this land so that you may live on it in peace; and tell Satan that He has no rights here. Claim it for God.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for small businesses which are closing due to the economy*
- *Pray for all those caught up in the scandals which feed the press*
- *Give thanks for personal prayers which have been answered*

Meditation

Great Creator and powerful Lord; be with me ...

as I do what is before me to accomplish this day,
give me the grace to value each moment I am given.

as I do what others require of me this day,
give me love so that I display kindness in everything I do.

as I do what You require of me this day,
give me the humility to accept Your highest call to service.

as I do what my work demands of me this day,
give me integrity so that others know they can depend on me.

as I do what I must do for myself this day,
give me the courage to accept the truth about the person I am.

as I do what should be done for good this day,
give me the wisdom I need to know what is right for others.

as I do what whatever will defeat the enemy this day,
give me discernment to spot his traps before I fall in them.

Your presence is all, and gives meaning to my day.

Bible Study - Matthew 19:13-15

¹³ *Just then, little children were brought to Jesus in order that He might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples criticized those who brought them;* ¹⁴ *but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such children as these.'* ¹⁵ *He laid his hands on them and then went on his way.*

Review

This passage describes the famous incident in which people brought children to Jesus for Him to bless. These are delightful verses of scripture, but they hide a powerful truth that had escaped the disciples and which they should have learned, about the Father's acceptance of children into the Kingdom. Neither should it escape our notice that children are a vital part of any discussion about marriage and family life, and it is profoundly important that these verses are read alongside those that went before. This is not an isolated text placed here by Matthew out of convenience; at the very least it rounds off the teaching about marriage and family life by placing everything in the context of the Kingdom of Heaven (19:14). At the very least

Jesus blesses little children. We can all identify with the sentiments of the story as Matthew tells it. It was common for people to bring children to local 'elders' for blessing on certain festival days, notably the 'Day of Atonement', and it was perhaps understandable that the disciples were wary of the drain such a public requirement may have placed upon Jesus. They had been told by Him that they were heading towards His death in Jerusalem, and their times together were proving to be intense times of teaching. They therefore sought to keep the children away, focussing on themselves and falling back into the social norms of their own day in which little children were of little significance.

Jesus turned the situation around by calling the children to Himself, and when He said 'for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such children as these' (19:14) he was effectively reminding the disciples of what He had only just taught them, that to enter the Kingdom, one had to become like a little child. At the end of both that teaching (18:1-5) and this (19:13-15), we are left in no doubt that the Kingdom of Heaven contains both 'the childlike' and also 'children'. It is impossible to read through these scriptures without accepting that children are welcome in the Kingdom as children, and as much as this was a challenge to the preconceptions of the people in Jesus' day, it is also a challenge to ours.

Marriage, family and children I do not think it incidental that Matthew includes this incident here. Marriage is not just about 'a man and a woman' in unity before God. That unity is designed primarily by God to be fruitful (Gen 1:28), and that means the bearing of children by which the whole human race survives and continues. Children, in Jesus' day, were understood to have little social significance, but they were also regarded as being under the absolute authority, care and protection of parents; something regarded as one of the highest privileges anyone could possess. Indeed, the whole Biblical language of 'father' and 'son' by which we talk about Jesus and His Father in Heaven, comes from this highly significant social background.

This teaching of Jesus is clear. Insofar as a man and a woman receive the gift of marriage and reflect the image of God, then their calling is to bear children who are as much a part of the Kingdom as they are, until they answer for themselves. It is assumed in the Bible that the responsibility for the upbringing of a child is exclusively the responsibility of parents, and that all parents are equally qualified and able to teach their children what is necessary for both faith and also life in the community. Parents also provided the entry level of access for young people into the world of work and social relationships. It may be that although schooling in modern life is indeed something which requires specialist education, we have in some parts of the world almost totally lost the sense of duty and responsibility which is God's purpose for parent and child, much to the detriment of our society.

The place of the child in the church It is a tragedy that churches are divided today about their attitude to children. Jesus' example cannot be denied or wished away, yet some churches insist on keeping children out of church, away from preaching and from sharing communion, for example. Sometimes people present the argument that little children do not understand the things of God and should therefore not be included in the sharing of communion or other spiritual activities of the church. Yet how are they to learn what real faith means to an individual unless they see adults on their knees receiving 'the body and

blood' of Christ, for example? We should all be regularly engaged in talking to children about the meaning of such things, and we cannot complain if children absent themselves from our traditional activities if we handle their spiritual growth on the model of secular 'education', and fail to engage with them about their real experience of God without preconditions.

Jesus challenges us always to see children as people, no less. They come under the authority of their parents and they have much to learn, but for Jesus and for God, they are people to be saved and brought into the Kingdom, nothing less.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways are children regarded as a nuisance within your church? Can this be changed?
2. In what ways are children honoured as belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven within your church, and how can this be encouraged?
3. How do children contribute to the Kingdom of God. Why can we not do without them?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I have to say that I become very sad when people tell me that they cannot worship if little children are present in services (and this has often been my experience). Small children do make a noise, but we cannot complain if teenagers leave our churches in droves if we give little children a wide berth from an early age. They know when they are not wanted. Personally, I see the future of the church as lying in families, and I believe that when God renews His church He will renew families.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Reflect on your own family experience, perhaps it was good, or perhaps it was bad. Nevertheless, pray for those who have a bad experience of family life and ask the Lord to bless such children. Pray also for those who have a good experience of family life, especially in the church, that they might bless others.*
- *Find a means to discuss the place of children in your church with some of your church's leaders.*

Final Prayer

Help us, Lord God, in a world where there are so many beautiful things for us to appreciate, to understand that You lie behind all the beauty we see. Help us to look beyond the obvious and the immediate things of life to connect with the love, power and awesome majesty of Your presence, and look forward to the time when all things will be one with You in Your Kingdom: AMEN