

THE CHILD IN A CHRISTIAN WORLD

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

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

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:15)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Apr. 13	Ps. 127	A Heritage from the Lord
T	Apr. 14	Prov. 2:1–6	My Child, Be Eager to Learn
W	Apr. 15	Matthew 18:7–14	Do Not Despise the Little Ones
Th	Apr. 16	Col. 3:20–25	Obedience That Is Acceptable before God
F	Apr. 17	Matt. 21:8–9, 15–17	Praise from the Mouths of Infants
Sa	Apr. 18	Prov. 20:7–12	Recognize the Good Deeds of Children

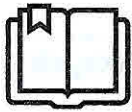
STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Leadership expert Rob Asghar wrote in *Forbes* magazine, “People can be divided roughly into two groups: guests and hosts.” Many adults desire authority positions because they think that this will elevate them, making them the guests of honor wherever they go. But the opposite is true. “If you’re a leader,” Asghar writes, “you’re *not* the guest of honor at the party. You’re the host.” There’s a certain mindset that goes along with being a good host. Hosts willingly play the role of providing everyone with the best possible experience, children as well as adults. They exude a warm, inviting spirit. They are outward-focused, concerned with the feelings of others and always willing to mop up spilled drinks.

Jesus knew about guests and hosts, which is why he said to his twelve disciples in the town of Capernaum, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). According to Jesus, people who occupy authority positions in the Christian community do not sit in seats of honor at an endless series of banquets; instead, they find themselves

servicing others. They end up acting as hosts to the very least of Christ's brothers and sisters—a role that Jesus illustrated by placing a little child in the middle of the disciples and saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37). Jesus wants us to act like hosts, and to focus our hospitality on the welcoming of children. He does this because little children can teach us how to "receive the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:15).

Christ our host, help us to welcome the children, the very least among us, who are critical to the practice of the Christian faith. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Mark 9:36–37, 42; Mark 10:13–16

9:36 Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." . . .

⁴²"If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

10:13 People were bringing children to him in order that he might touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

JESUS PUTS CHILDREN AT THE CENTER

In Mark's Gospel, the disciples are slow to understand what Jesus is trying to teach them about greatness, status, humility, and hospitality. In the ninth chapter, Jesus discovers that his disciples have been arguing about which of them is the greatest. He tells them that the greatest must be "last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35), and then illustrates this by showing them embracing a child. He says, "Whoever welcomes one such child

in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37), making a clear connection between welcoming children, welcoming him, and welcoming God.

One chapter later, Jesus’ teaching is revisited. Jesus clarifies practices in marriage and divorce, and then a group of people begin to bring children to him. The disciples speak sternly to them, which makes Jesus angry. He says, “Let the children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:14–15). Clearly, Jesus makes a special place for children in his ministry and in God’s world. He does not marginalize them but celebrates them and puts them at the center.

“Often, 21st century people think that Jesus is saying that we need to become innocent like children or just have faith like children,” says Sharon Betsworth, author of *Children in Early Christian Narratives*. “But his first century audience would have thought about the vulnerability, dependence, and marginal status of children in their world. They wouldn’t have thought of an idealized view of children and childhood, but rather that Jesus was telling them to become among those of low status.” Betsworth points out that previous stories in Mark’s Gospel support this view of children being marginalized in the community, dependent on their parents and on Jesus, and vulnerable to illness, death, and mistreatment. “But these children become examples of what the reign of God is all about,” says Betsworth, “and who are acceptable members of God’s community of justice and peace.” Children are examples of the beauty of dependence.

 **Why do you think Jesus puts vulnerable and dependent children at the center of the kingdom of God?**

HOSPITALITY TOWARD CHILDREN

The practice of hospitality is central to the ministry of Jesus. In Mark, he feeds a crowd of 5,000 (Mark 6:30–44), and then 4,000 (Mark 8:1–10), revealing his desire to nourish people both physically and spiritually. He eats with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16), and welcomes little children (Mark 9:36, 10:14). Throughout his ministry, Jesus enters into the lives of people who are on the margins of society, struggling with hunger,

shame, disease, and vulnerability. He does this out of deep compassion for them, but also because he shares their struggles—his own experience of homelessness, hunger, thirst, and nakedness shape his empathy for the distressed of this world and motivate him to help those who are in the greatest need.

Jesus also challenges us to show hospitality to people on the margins. In Matthew, he says that when we welcome a stranger, we are welcoming him (Matt. 25:31–40). In Mark, he promises, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37). The surprising power of hospitality is that it actually puts us in touch with Jesus and with God. Our welcome of children and people who are marginalized—both personally and in the life of the church—connects us to the Risen Christ and to the Spirit of God. On the other hand, our mistreatment of these carries serious consequences. “If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,” warns Jesus, “it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42).

The benefit of showing hospitality to children is that it teaches us about life in the kingdom of God. After welcoming the children, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). He says this in order to teach us that we enter the kingdom through our vulnerability instead of our strength, and through a willingness to be dependent on God instead of on ourselves. We prepare for the kingdom by welcoming children—who even today are on the margins of society—and by providing them with the best possible experience.

 **What steps can you take in your home and your congregation to be more hospitable to children?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

In his book, *The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality*, pastor Henry Brinton points to Christian communities that take steps to welcome children and people on the margins and make them part of the family of God. These actions can benefit all people in the church. At Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Virginia, a mini-retreat was held on the

topic of hospitality. Intergenerational small groups—including children, youth, and adults—moved through the building and made recommendations about ways the church could be more welcoming. Some ideas were simple, such as adding bright colors and flowers to the women’s bathrooms. Others were more creative—converting a main-level classroom into a comfortable family room for parents and children. They learned from Saddleback Church in California, where a play area has been built around the Children’s Ministry Center and Nursery Building. Adults and children can go into the building, called The Refinery, which contains snack bars and lounge areas surrounded by a skate park, waterfall, and patios.

At Vienna Presbyterian Church in Virginia, a public-school teacher and church member offer a “Friendship Class” for intellectually disabled and mentally challenged persons. The class was started for a few children who live with Down Syndrome. It has grown to include twenty-eight students with varying abilities and challenges. To be hospitable to these students, the class is fully accessible and located near a bathroom. Chairs are set in a square so that students and teachers can see each other. The format of the class includes the sharing of good news and bad news, a Bible study based on the Sunday sermon, and a closing prayer. It follows a regular pattern because consistency is important. The class has grown as students bring their friends, and as participants engage with the community by participating in walks to fight world hunger.

Good work is being done overseas as well. In the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil, a focus on hospitality to children has improved the life of the church. At one Sunday evening worship service in the city of Natal, the church was packed and over half the worshipers were young people. They wore T-shirts with the message “Jesus: He makes me happy,” and offered rousing pieces of inspirational music, complete with choreography. “The church is the church only when it exists for others,” said the preacher—a mission-minded message for congregations around the world.

? How can you change your church building use and mission program to expand hospitality to children and youth?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Some scholars see in the disciples' dialogue less of a petty conversation about "who is the greatest?" and a more serious consideration of "what is greatness?" In Mark 8, Jesus says that the Son of Man must suffer and die. We might re-imagine the conversation: "what is the nature of greatness"? True greatness is revealed through service by taking care of those who are most vulnerable, such as children, especially those the world is most likely to ignore.
2. The act of holding/welcoming a child is, at the same time, an act of holding/welcoming Jesus. If the point of holding a child is because children are vulnerable, then this declaration is very similar to Matthew's parable of sheep and goats and the ways people treat—or do not treat—"the least of these" (Matt. 25).
3. In a commentary on Mark 10:13–16, Malina and Rohrbaugh offer these insights: "In view here are the proverbial vulnerability and helplessness of children. The picture is one of peasant women, many of whose babies would be dead within their first year, fearfully holding them out for Jesus to touch. Jesus' laying his hands on children to protect them from or clear them of the evil eye (this is the main malignancy from which parents have to protect their children in the Mediterranean) is offered as a model for how to enjoy God's patronage (entering the kingdom of heaven). The argument is that God's patronage belongs to those ready and willing to be God's clients."¹

1. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 243.