



CARING
FOR SURVIVORS
of Sexual Abuse

Basyle Tchividjian
and Justin Holcomb

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Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 19:13-15

The tenderness and care Jesus showed for children is an expression of God's heart toward the small, the weak, and the vulnerable, as seen throughout the Old Testament. In this passage, we see several things: Jesus's value of children, his advocacy on behalf of children, and his admonition to those who prevent children from his presence. This passage is perhaps one of the most sobering illustrations of how we can spend a lot of time with Jesus and still overlook the intrinsic value of those who are greatly esteemed and loved by him. It's not that the disciples didn't care about these children; it appears that they acted on a belief that the little ones interrupting Jesus were simply less important than the adults who were in the audience.

The response of Jesus to the disciples' rebuke could not have communicated more clearly how much he treasures those whom others overlook or disregard. He demonstrates this same beautiful love over and over again in Scripture. In spite of Jesus's expansive value statements about children, the narrative of the above passage can continue to be true today. Although God has placed an enormous importance on children and the vulnerable, his followers often respond to them with rebuke and marginalization.

The church must quickly learn to course-correct, particularly in its response to survivors of abuse. A church reluctant to acknowledge and embrace this truth not only hurts others, but also exposes our failure to grasp the heart of the gospel message.

It is important to note that the children in this passage were rebuked by those who were closest to Jesus—his disciples. These individuals spent three years walking alongside Jesus, learning from him, and witnessing his amazing miracles. One might have expected that those who had spent so much time with Jesus would have advocated on behalf of those who are highly valued by him. Instead, their actions demonstrated a lack of care and value for these vulnerable ones. In fact, there was only one person in the crowd that day that advocated on behalf of those who had been rebuked and marginalized by the crowd. Fortunately, that one person was Jesus—the God of the universe. In that moment in time, Jesus taught all of us the importance and value of noticing, welcoming, and caring for the vulnerable amongst us. That includes children and those who have suffered from abuse.

Scripture's Call to Care for Children

Before Jesus walked the earth, part of God's law, given at Mt. Sinai, was that no one should "mistreat any widow or fatherless child" (Exodus 22:22). Indeed, God is one who "executes justice for the fatherless" (Deuteronomy 10:18) and curses anyone who

perverts the justice due to orphans (Deuteronomy 27:19). The Lord says that no one should do wrong or be violent toward innocent children and orphans (Jeremiah 22:3). Not only does God want his people to love and care for children, but they are called to do everything in their power to stop those who try to hurt, abuse, or oppress them. “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (Isaiah 1:17). Children are a gift from God (Psalm 127:3) and a blessing, and are to be loved, disciplined, and cared for.

Jesus Values Children

As mentioned above, in his ministry, Jesus showed striking interest in and love for children. To the surprise of his disciples, he often included them in his teaching. When the disciples came to Jesus asking him which one of them was going to be the greatest in Christ’s kingdom, Jesus called a child to himself (Matthew 18:2) and said, “whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4). Jesus went on, telling his followers that part of their duty is to receive little children: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Matthew 18:5). In Mark 10, Jesus upholds childlike faith as admirable: “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Mark 10:15; cf. Luke 18:17).

Part of Jesus's ministry on earth also involved healing children. In Mark 5:39, Jesus came into the house of a ruler of the synagogue, whose daughter had just died. Jesus said that she was not dead, but only sleeping. After they laughed at him, Jesus said to the child, "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (Mark 5:41; cf. Luke 8:54). Mark recounts what happened next: "And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement" (Mark 5:42). Similarly, in Mark 9, Jesus encounters a young boy who had been having demonic attacks. Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out (v. 25) and the boy fell down as if he were dead. Jesus took him by the hand and he was healed (v. 27). Jesus, who calls himself "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), brings life and healing to children.

Jesus wants his followers to honor, protect, and care for those among them who are small and vulnerable, especially children.

Common Responses of the Church

Rebuke & marginalization: The dynamics of Matthew 19:13–15 play out in faith communities whenever we fail to respond to child abuse survivors in a manner that demonstrates love and value to victims. Too often those who have been traumatized find themselves being rebuked and accused of interrupting the work of Jesus. This could not be further