

World Day of Prayer 2016 • Supplemental Material

Bible Study One

Receive Children

Scripture: Mark 10:13–16

Narrator: Let us imagine that we are in a meeting with the women (and men) of Mark’s community, who participated in writing the Gospel of Mark. Let us hear their testimony.

Woman One: We are the few members, men and women, of the first Christian communities in Rome who actively participated in the writing of the “Gospel of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1) around the year 71 AD. To properly understand its message, we believe it is important to keep in mind where this book originated, and in what situations, with what motivations and with which goal it was written.

This work did not come out of nothing. Little by little, it came out of the life of our communities and our walk of faith. That faith was motivated by the preaching of Jesus’ apostles and the itinerant missionaries who visited our communities. We kept the memory of their testimonies alive by passing them down to others in our communities; maybe our mothers and grandmothers repeated the stories during celebrations and reflection meetings. All this was organized while taking into account the life and the circumstances of our communities. Our goal was to keep the memory of the life of Jesus alive so that it would guide us through difficult times.

Woman Two: The Gospel of Mark was written 40 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. By that time there were dozens of Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. From itinerant missionaries who traveled throughout the empire, we heard of the joys, difficulties and hope of many of these communities (1 Thessalonians 1:7–8). By the use of roads and many boats traveling along the Mediterranean, the exchange of news between communities throughout the empire was fairly easy (Romans 1:8, Acts 18:1–3, 1 Peter 1:1). This exchange of news encouraged us and gave us the strength to persevere.

The book was heavily influenced by the difficulties faced by Christians—persecution, threats, slander and suspicion were our “daily bread.” It was not easy to find time and space for writing while having to take care of our homes and children. So, the gospel was slowly written, rooted in community life, with an atmosphere of great openness to the Spirit’s presence and listening to God’s call.

Woman Three: Yes, it was written by us, active members of the communities. In spite of our weaknesses, we sought to be disciples of Jesus and witnesses of his realm. It is evident that the entire gospel was written based on the testimonies of those who lived close to Jesus. We were so lucky that several of them lived among us, like Peter and Mark (1 Peter 5:13).

Woman Four: There are many issues we could have raised related to the situation of children in our time, but we chose this one as an example of how Jesus challenged the understanding of relationships in the community—caring for the most vulnerable people and the demands of living for and building God’s realm.

In the Roman Empire, one of the cruelest practices of adult behavior regarding children was to abandon the newly born, because of rights conferred to the head of the family. The newly born was placed at the feet of the head of the family. If he did not lift up the child from the floor, that child could not be raised by that family.

In Judaism, it was not permitted to reject or kill the newly born. Nevertheless, the Jewish father could sell or pawn his children. If the father kept his children, they had to work to help their parents provide for the family from a very early age.

The motives for abandoning children were several, and yet, the most prevalent was the socioeconomic situation of the majority of the population, which was characterized by complete misery.

Narrator: Let’s go now to the biblical text to receive guidance from its lights. Let’s reflect on the perspective of “Receive children.”

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Reading: Mark 9:33–37

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me . . . ”

Jesus returns to Capernaum and, upon arriving at the house (perhaps of Peter and Andrew), he asks the disciples why they are arguing. Their silence signals the inappropriateness of their conversation. Mark says that Jesus sits. This is significant. Sitting was considered the position of a master, and this was a teachable moment. What Jesus says next is surprising for his audience, for it consisted only of men. Jesus took a child and said that anyone who receives a child will receive him, and whoever receives him, receives God. Why this shocked his audience is difficult to understand today due to the present emphasis on the innocence of children. But the child in the context of Jesus’ lesson was not even considered a person. Furthermore, the child should have been with the women and not with Jesus and his disciples.

To say that whoever receives Jesus, receives God was not an issue, but to affirm that anyone who receives a child receives Jesus was inconceivable. The contempt for children was such that it was common among the Romans, who needed an heir, to adopt an adult rather than a child. Jesus presented the child, who was socially invisible, as his representative. His example completely upended the values of that time.

Reading: Mark 10:13-16

“Let the little children come to me . . . ”

Jesus’ receiving children meant that he received those who brought them, possibly the mothers and grandmothers. This was comparable to giving those who were marginalized a status of honor. Children were to be received regardless of their economic, physical or psychological status.

Jesus’ conduct is meant not to merely correct ideas about children and people who have no power in society, but to also correct the behavior of adults toward these marginalized groups. It is about learning how to receive the others. The signs of God’s realm point toward renewal and reconciliation, and children can actively take part in that.

Jesus’ example inspired Mark’s community to rethink how to be a church. What is the model of community that the text offers us? The church is a community that witnesses to the signs of God’s realm. Children are welcome. They are received. As we take part in educating children, we create community that resembles the face of God’s realm. When the child grows up, he or she will give testimony of that.

Both Mark 9:37 and 10:15 reminded the community of their responsibility to receive those who are vulnerable or considered worthless in society. This attitude changed the ethical norm of that time and made it possible for the community to continue the mission of Jesus.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the text evoke in me?
2. Who brought children to Jesus? Was it the father, mother, older brother or grandmother? What did they expect when taking the children to Jesus?
3. What kind of children were there for Jesus to touch—sick children, disabled, slaves, orphans?
4. What does the blessing of Jesus mean for them?
5. What does it mean to receive children from the perspective of Jesus. What does it mean for us today?

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Bible Study Two

Like Children Receiving Jesus

Scripture: Luke 19:1–10

How difficult it is for serious, rational and judicious adults to understand these words of Jesus!

Zacchaeus was a rich adult man, a chief tax collector for Rome. But he climbed a tree to see Jesus. For a moment he allowed his attention not to be focused on money and wealth, but on Jesus.

Zacchaeus acted as a child when he climbed the tree to see Jesus, rather than acting as a rich, corrupt adult. Out of curiosity, he went to see who Jesus was. This was an absurd action for someone from whom this was not expected. Imagine Zacchaeus, on an average day, walking the streets of Jericho: An elderly man, thick-set, short of stature, with fancy clothes, widely known throughout the world, hated by some, admired by others. Suddenly he appears in a fig tree, for no other reason than curiosity about the visitor of the day. By becoming like a child, Zacchaeus found himself face to face with salvation.

Nowhere in the gospel do we see that Jesus knew Zacchaeus prior to this. The story as presented by Luke allows us to conclude that Zacchaeus did not know Jesus, either. Everything that happened after he climbed the tree was a surprise to Zacchaeus. Childlike curiosity led him to climb the tree. In doing so, he entered a child's world. He not only climbed the tree, but he ran to do so. His sense of urgency and curiosity to know Jesus was greater than his desire to secure more business or get richer.

That “absurd” action caught Jesus’ attention. Everyone who is willing to become like a child can enter the realm of God.

Zacchaeus’ second “absurd” action was to obey Jesus’ order to quickly come down from the tree and to receive the unknown visitor with joy. Zacchaeus displayed the greatest “childlike” quality by obeying

the command of an adult, which, in this case, was to quickly descend from the tree and receive an unknown person in his house.

The third “absurd” action of Zacchaeus was to offer half of his wealth to the poor and pay back four times the amount for any defrauded money. What sensible businessman, according to the norms of this world, would offer half of his wealth to the poor and promise to return to those he has cheated four times the debt when nobody is requiring him to do so? Any businessman knows that there is no financial return from money given to the poor. Even today, we see Christian organizations and even churches investing offerings given for the poor, with no effective programs for social change. The church is called, like Zacchaeus, to give everything; both the church and we are asked to act with compassion. “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

It is important to note that Zacchaeus acts without expectation of personal benefit, not even personal salvation. In fact, Zacchaeus’s promise to give his wealth to the poor comes after Jesus is accused of having entered the house of a sinner. Like a child, Zacchaeus decided to give all he had in response to the great joy of having received a person like Jesus in his home.

Zacchaeus’s decision to be like a child was what brought him close to Jesus and gave him access to the realm of God: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). Jesus opened the doors of God’s realm to Zacchaeus because he became as a child. It is from that perspective that Jesus received Zacchaeus, and it touched the essence of the person about whom others perceived otherwise. Jesus did have a special relationship with children, and the stories of that relationship are not meant to be taken merely as metaphors.

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Bible Study Two

Questions for Discussion

1. What does this text evoke in me?
2. What do we see in Zacchaeus' behavior that is unexpected? What are the childlike characteristics reflected in his actions?
3. What does it mean from the biblical perspective to be like children to receive Jesus? What does it mean for us today?
4. What does the interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus teach us regarding the personal, social and ethical decision on our Christian life in today's world?
5. Which of our attitudes or behaviors must be transformed to become "like a child"?