

To Such As These Belongs the Reign of God – Judith Gundry-Volf

1. Children as Recipients of the Reign of God

Mark 10:13-16, Matt 19:13-15, Luke 18:15-17. Jesus blesses the children brought to him and teaches that the reign of God belongs to them. He is mentioned angry on two occasions and one is related to children. Beatitudes: the lowly and the powerless are the primary beneficiaries of that reign. John Dominic Crossan asserts that Jesus taught a “kingdom of children” = “kingdom of nobodies”, an overstatement. Children’s vulnerability and powerlessness lies at the heart of Jesus’s extension of the Reign to them as the intended recipients.

2. Children as Models of Entering the Reign of God

Mark 10:15 “whoever does not receive the reign of God as a child will not enter it.” – shocking because in Jewish literature children are not models for adults and for Greco-Romans the comparison to a child was highly insulting. There are 2 options:

- adults adopting a childlike status (lowly status) or emulating childlike quality.

Willi Egger argues that Jesus turns a typical Jewish formula about entering the kingdom of God on its head by stating that not what works for the Law is required for entrance, but rather that “whoever does not receive the reign of God as a child will never enter it.” Since children were not required to keep the Law, Egger concludes that “as a child” = “as one who has neither obedience nor obligation to the Law”. No rejection of the Law is implied, simply the acceptance of those who do not yet have obedience to the Law. Others teach that the reign of God is a “gift” that comes in a “totally gratuitous way”. Thus, “as a child” = “as one who is dependent solely on divine favor”. “As a child” then seems to involve both a certain status – dependence on God and trust, which are both childlike.

3. Humble like a child

In Matthew, Jesus talks about children in connection to “who is the greatest in the reign of God”. Little ones = socially weak, objects of divine care and protection. Matthew’s Jesus teaches childlikeness as humility toward children, on the part of church leaders in particular, and for the sake of children who are at the mercy of those greater than themselves in the community.

4. Serving Children and Being Great

Mark 9: 33-37, “receive” or “welcome” is used for guest, which implies serving them. In order to be great in the reign of God, disciples have to love and serve children = low status activity. Eschatological reversal – “whoever wants to be the first must be the last of all and the servant of all”. Caring for children – primarily an undistinguished activity of marginalized people (women) is modeled by Jesus for the male disciples, to demonstrate greatness that corresponds to the reign of God. Jesus places children at the center of the community’s attention.

5. Welcoming Children and Welcoming Jesus

“whoever welcomes such child welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” – implication of social practices leading to faith responses.

The child represents Jesus as a humble, suffering figure. Welcoming the child = receiving Jesus and his mission as the suffering Son of Man., mutually interpretive. Why the parallel? Children were sometimes objects of extreme brutality, by exposure or abandonment to death or fate. To welcome a child in Jesus’ name = to welcome Jesus himself in the sense that he humbled himself like a little child and endured the worst lot of the little child in carrying out his mission. Women, who cared for children also cared for Jesus as he suffered. Men, who tried to prevent the children from coming to Jesus abandoned Jesus in his passion. Particular social practices (towards children mostly) may have helped shape faith responses here.