

Matthew 18:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

Analysis

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them.

This verse is Jesus' dramatic response to the disciples' question about greatness in the kingdom of heaven (v. 1). The Greek verb "called" (*proskaleō*, προσκαλέω) suggests summoning with authority and affection. Jesus deliberately placed a *paidion* (παῖδιον, small child) as a living illustration at the center of attention.

The action of setting the child "in the midst" (*en mesō*, ἐν μέσῳ) is theatrical and purposeful—the child becomes the focal point, reversing normal social order where children occupied marginal positions. In first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman culture, children lacked social status, legal rights, and power. By elevating a child to center stage, Jesus radically subverts worldly values of greatness.

This gesture anticipates Jesus' teaching that kingdom greatness comes through humility, dependence, and childlike faith (v. 3-4). The child represents receptivity, trust, and recognition of need—qualities essential for entering God's kingdom. Jesus Himself embodied this humble dependence, though Lord of all, becoming a servant (Philippians 2:5-8). The passage challenges every culture's pursuit of status, power, and self-promotion, calling disciples to embrace the lowliness that paradoxically leads to true exaltation (Matthew 23:12).

Historical Context

This teaching occurred during Jesus' Galilean ministry, likely in Capernaum (Matthew 17:24), around 29 AD. The disciples' question about greatness (v. 1) followed Jesus' transfiguration and His prediction of His death and resurrection—yet they remained focused on earthly power and position, expecting Jesus to establish a political messianic kingdom.

In the ancient world, children were loved but held little social value until they matured. Roman law gave fathers absolute authority (*patria potestas*) over children, who could be sold, exposed, or killed. Jewish culture was more protective but still viewed children as incomplete persons who needed education and maturation to contribute to society.

Jesus' radical elevation of children as models of kingdom citizenship shocked His audience. No rabbi or philosopher used children as positive examples of spiritual virtue. This teaching aligned with Jesus' broader pattern of exalting the lowly—the poor, the sick, women, tax collectors—and humbling the exalted. Early Christianity's counter-cultural valuing of children, along with prohibitions against infanticide and abortion, distinguished the church from pagan society and contributed to Christianity's growth as families saw children as divine gifts rather than burdens.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. What childlike qualities—humility, dependence, trust—do you need to cultivate in your faith?
2. How does worldly pursuit of greatness differ from kingdom greatness, and where are you tempted by the former?

3. In what ways can you 'set aside' status and power to serve others humbly?
4. How does Jesus' valuing of children inform Christian attitudes toward life, family, and the vulnerable?
5. Where is God calling you to embrace lowliness and dependence rather than self-sufficiency?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	προσκαλεσάμενος	ὁ	Ἰησοῦς	παιδίον	ἔστησεν
And	called		Jesus	a little child	and set
G2532	G4341	G3588	G2424	G3813	G2476

αὐτῶν	ἐν	μέσῳ	αὐτῶν
him	in	the midst	him
G846	G1722	G3319	G846

Additional Cross-References

1 Kings 3:7 (Parallel theme): And now, O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in.