

THESE LITTLE ONES.

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When Jesus in His ministry made use of the expression, "these little ones", did He limit His meaning to actual children? Was He thinking of children as such at all? Did He not use the expression as synonymous with disciples? There is a wide divergence of interpretation, a divergence so radical and far reaching that the entire theological system which one holds will be influenced by the view adopted. The expression occurs six times in the Synoptics Mat. 10:42; 18:6, 10, 14; Mk. 9:42; Luke 17:2, though its actual use may have been restricted to two or three occasions.

In Mat. 10:42 is the first use of the term. It is about the middle of His ministry, when Jesus is sending forth the twelve apostles. It is a pivotal time in His ministry, when Jesus is giving to Christianity an organization that will be prepared to maintain and extend Christian principles when He leaves the world. In this Jesus shows that He is no theorist thinking that His teachings will care for themselves apart from men and organization. He gives counsel to hearten them; He bids them have a courageous life not knowing the meaning of fear; He announces their life as a representative one, each one stands for Christ. Jesus represents God, the disciples represent Him—in this is exhibited the honor and the responsibility of their office. To reject them and their message brings heavy condemnation. To receive them in a fitting way brings large blessings, "He that receiveth a prophet—prophet's reward." The Apostles were New Testament prophets, not so much fore-tellers as forth-tellers, not predictors but preachers. If one should receive them as prophets of God, he would receive the reward due to the prophet himself. As

lower in outward rank would be the "righteous" man—this term designating the disciple as akin to God in His holy nature. There may be no reference in this term, to any pre-eminently holy or saintly character, but it is declared that the emphasis in the disciple's life rests on his holiness. Meyer says: "The Apostles belong to both categories inasmuch as they receive and preach the revelation communicated to God through Christ, and seeing that, through their faith in the Lord, they are characterized by true and holy righteousness of life." "And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones * * * in the name of a disciple * * * reward." The expression, "these little ones," is at once interpreted, in the same sentence by the term "disciple". The term disciple is the common and favorite word of Jesus when describing His followers. Discipleship involves self-renunciation, an utter devotion to Christ and fellowship with Him (Mat. 6:24). There is and can be no reference here to literal children. It is forbidden by the use of the term "disciple". It is altogether probable that the term "these little ones" embraces all the followers of Christ, just as the aged John (1 Jno. 2:13) designates all believers as "little children". The drift of the passage eliminates all reference to children as such. The "you" of v. 40 embraces all whom he is addressing. Jesus looks on the gathered assembly as prophets, as righteous men, as His own little ones.

Alford thinks the "little" refers definitely to some children who were present. Against this view Dr. Philip Schaff writes: "But 'these' is evidently to be taken as pointing (deiktikos) to the disciples then present". Meyer suggests as a reason for the use of "little": "According to the whole context which has been depicting the despised and painful circumstances of the disciples it is to be regarded as significant that Jesus employs the term 'little.' They are little in the world's esteem; they are great in God's sight. Even if little children are

believers the emphasis is not upon their literal childhood but upon their discipleship. Children, as such, are ruled out by any fair interpretation of Jesus' own words.

Matthew 18:5-14. The disciples had been in a controversy over the question who should be the greatest in the approaching Messianic Kingdom. With the spirit of the politician they were looking for the best positions. The imperfect human nature of the Apostles is everywhere apparent, also their grossly inaccurate and materialistic conception of the Kingdom. They were full of an unholy ambition. Jesus rebuking them took a little child and set him in the midst of them. It was a little child, called to him (Mat. 18:2); sitting by him (Luke 9:47); taken in his arms (Mark 9:36). He exhorts them to see in the child a type of the spirit that must dwell in them. What is the spirit in children to which Jesus calls attention. Little children are by no means faultless; envy, jealousy, self-will, self-seeking early appear. It is not innocence as Chrysostom urges, though children have not developed wicked characters (I Cor. 14:20). The one characterizing spirit of childhood to which Jesus calls attention is the complete and utter dependence of little childhood. An animal can care for itself in a few days—a child is helpless for months. Warfield in Hastings gives the correct view: "Humility seems to be represented, not as the characterizing mark of childhood or of childlikeness, but rather as the attitude of heart in which alone we can realize in our consciousness that quality which characterizes childhood. That quality is conceived here also as helplessness, while childlikeness consists in the reproduction in the objective state of utter dependence on God which is the real condition of every sinner." The humility urged is that of laying aside their claims to position, as though God were under obligation to them, laying aside their pride with its self-asserting power and going back to the sense of complete dependence of little children. It would be

humiliating to them to go from pride of heart to the poverty of spirit implied in their becoming little children with their complete helplessness. Against Meyer's view that the innocence of childhood is the trait to which attention is called, it is to be noted that Jesus nowhere speaks of the innocence of human nature, though he does dwell on the fact of a universal sinfulness (Luke 11:13) and a universal fleshhood, (John 3:6). With v. 4 the incident is closed and the discussion takes on a far wider sweep. The question of humility is not mentioned. There is in the following verses the affirmation and pledge that the entire divine power is set apart for the protection and glorification of all Christ's disciples. Even if they enter the Kingdom with all the helplessness of infants they are not like children tossed out to the forces of nature; they are cared for by God's tenderness and power. In vs. 5, 6, Jesus explicitly defines His meaning. 'One such little child' becomes "one of these little ones that believe in me". Such children God takes under His special care. He rewards those who help them; He punishes those who injure them. The angels who serve in God's presence care for them (Heb. 1:14). Meyer has no foundation for his assertion that Jesus confirms the belief that every believer has a guardian angel. But it remains abidingly true that the angels of God above and providence on the earth shelter and defend the believer. It is not the will of God that one of these little ones shall perish (v. 14). How often is this used at Sunday School anniversaries as though Jesus were speaking of the cradle! His thought is of the believer, as expressed in John 10:28; 17:9; Romans 8:29, 30. That Jesus has no reference to children, as a class, is evident from the emphasis that is laid upon the individual in this section. It is the *one* such little child, *one* sheep, *one* little one in vs. 5, 6, 11, 12, 14. Because Jesus cares for the one, all must have the large mindedness of Paul in caring for others (I Cor. 9:22).

Mark 9:42, "And whosoever shall cause one of these little ones that believe in me * * * sea." This is parallel to Mat. 18:6. Jesus Himself defines the "little ones" as those who believe in Him. If the expression were not thus limited and defined in the same sentence it would be evident from an examination of the preceding verse. Jesus, addressing the entire group of disciples, says: "You", and then characterizes them as those who "belong to Christ", one common thought fills all these expressions, belonging to Christ, little ones, believing in Me. Mark 9:42 throws light also upon Mat. 10:42, already noticed. "The little ones" of Mat. 10:42 becomes "you" that is Christ's disciples, in Mark 9:42; and "in the name of a disciple" in the first becomes "in the name that ye are Christ's" in the second. In the passage Mark 9:42 Jesus has no reference to literal children, but all reference is to believers. Luke 17:2. "It were better for him * * * one of these little ones to stumble". There can be no reference to children in this passage. In v. 1, Jesus is addressing His entire group of followers. "He said unto His disciples". Occasions of stumbling will come, not by any fatalistic necessity, but with an assured certainty arising from the weakness and wickedness of human nature. Jesus cares for His little ones with a great concern. To cause one to stumble is to commit a grievous crime against one for whom Christ died. Parallel statements are found in Mt. 18:6 and Mark 9:42.

It is maintained by some that the two passages in Mark 9:37 and Luke 9:47 show that the term child must be taken in a literal sense. These two passages are parallel to Mat. 18:1-5. In the latter passage it has been shown that under no circumstances can "little ones" be other than believers. The passage is full and conclusive. The passages in Mark and Luke are compressed statements of the account in Matthew. On every principle of interpretation we must permit the plain and explicit

statement of Matthew to control the meaning assigned to the other two, if there be any doubt as to their rendering. We may regard it as settled that in every case where Jesus makes mention of His "little ones" He means always and absolutely His disciples.

We may make enquiry whether by "these little ones" Jesus means all His followers or does He limit the term as Meyer does to the weak, the small in faith, the immature, the beginners in the Christian life? Godet and others hold to this position. It will be found that such gradations, though they exist in fact, are not here involved in Christ's teachings. In Mat. 11:42, Jesus defines the term "these little ones" by the general term "disciple". In Mark 9:42 "these little ones" is commensurate with "you" of v. 41, which embraces all Christ's followers. In Mat. 18:5-14 "the little ones" are identified with those to whom God has pledged His keeping power. Jesus does not assign His disciples to differing grades, but looks on them as one whole, the body of believers. There may be varying rewards in heaven (Luke 19:17), but it is certain on exegetical grounds, that the expression here discussed does not contain any hints of gradations within the body of disciples. It is maintained by Warfield that the expression is a Messianic one found in Isa. 60:22 and Zech. 13:7. There is no reference in these passages to children, but the diminutive term alludes to the unassuming smallness of those who should be the Lord's everlasting possession and constitute His glorious kingdom.

Jesus regarded His followers and spoke of them in a very tender and affectionate way. They are His "little children," (Jno. 13:33); His little flock, (Luke 13:32); His little sheep (Jno. 10:7, 16), His little lambs (Jno. 21:15); His little ones. He applies these terms not because of their weakness, or their low social life, but because they were His own. He tried to show, in words, what His heart was.

A passage akin to the six passages considered, though the expression "these little ones" is not found in it is Mat. 19:13, "Suffer the little children * * * to such belongeth the Kingdom of heaven." Occurring near the close of His ministry, it is a convincing proof that the disciples knew nothing of infant baptism. Those brought to Him were babes (*βρέφη*) (Luke, 18:15). They were not able physically or spiritually to come to Him. Jesus did not say of "these," but of "such" is the Kingdom of heaven. Two widely divergent opinions are held that Jesus refers to children in a literal sense, that there is no reference whatever to children but to childlike persons, to believers. Meyer, against Bengel and deWette, says, "We are not to understand literal children, for the Messianic Kingdom cannot be said to belong to children as such." All the Greek commentators declare that the reference is not at all to children, but to the childlike. Morison maintains that Jesus refers exclusively to children, not referring at all to childlike believers. That Jesus means believers is evident from three considerations. First, the word "such" shows that the child is used as an illustration. The comparison shows that He means not children but persons compared with them, that is childlike people. Second, the immediate context in Mk. 10:15 and Lu. 18:17 "whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child," shows that He means those who can intelligently receive the teachings of Christ. Third, the expression "Kingdom of heaven" limits the meaning to believers. The entrance into the Kingdom is by the new birth and repentance—the Kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit—people press into it—it must be received. Baptists have always believed in the salvation of infants. In Reformation times, at Augsburg, it was brought against them as a monstrous thing that they held to the salvation of all dying in infancy. But the New Testament teaches that the

Kingdom of Christ belongs to those who intelligently know Christ.

To interpret "such" as limiting His words to children leads to wide-spread and disastrous results. Trumbull, in his "Our Misunderstood Bible," affirms from this passage that all children are born in the Kingdom, that culture and unfolding alone are required to develop the Christian life. The child may not be exhorted to come to Christ, he is already in Christ. There is a strong tendency in this direction in Methodist literature and practise today. Several recent theological publications, claiming to be of the scientific kind, speak in the same definite way, forbidding the appeal to come to Christ. In a far saner and more New Testament way, Dr. Broadus discusses this question in his commentary on Matthew.