



## WORLD DAY OF PRAYER

Prepared by the Cuban WDP Committee

March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016

“Receive children. Receive me.”

### Bible Study 1

#### Receive children

#### Bible Text: Mark 10:13-16

**Narrator:** Let us imagine that we are in a meeting with the women of Mark’s community, who participated in the writing process of the basic document of the Gospel of Mark. Let us hear their testimony.

**Woman 1:** 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 A.D. To properly understand its message, we believe it is important to keep in mind where this book originated, and in what situations, motivations, and with which goal it was written.

To be honest, this work did not come out of nothing. Little by little, it came out of the life and walk of faith within our communities motivated, by the preaching of the Apostles and the itinerant missionaries, who visited our communities. We kept the memory of the testimonies alive by passing them down to the communities—maybe by our mothers and grandmothers—during the 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 2:** The Gospel of Mark was written forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. By that time there were dozens of Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. Through the Christians and itinerant missionaries who traveled or lived in Rome, we heard of the joys, difficulties, and hope of many communities scattered throughout the world (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 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 home 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 3:** 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 Kingdom. 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 4:** 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 kingdom.

In the Roman Empire, one of the cruelest practices of adult behavior with regards to children was to abandon the newly born, and that could be evidenced by the rights conferred to the head of the family. The newly born was placed at the feet of the head of the family and 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, and even more, children had to work to help their parents provide for the family at a very early age.

The motives for abandoning children could be several, and yet, the most prevalent would be the socio-economic situation of the majority of the population, which was characterized by complete misery.

**Narrator:** Let's now go to the biblical text to receive guidance from its lights. Let's reflect on the perspective of "Receive children."

**Reading: Mark 9:33-37.** "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me..."

Jesus returns to Capernaum and on arriving at the house (perhaps that of Peter and Andrew's), he asks the disciples why they are arguing. Their silence signals the inappropriateness of their conversation. The Evangelist says that Jesus sits because this is the position of a master; it was a teachable moment. What he says next is very surprising for his audience at the time, 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, she or he should have been with the women and not with the teachers 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 changed the values of dignity in their 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 grandmother. This was comparable to giving the marginalized, status of honor and greatness. Children were to be received regardless of their economic, physical, or psychological status.

Jesus' conduct is 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 the Kingdom point out towards renewal and reconciliation, and children can actively take part in that.

Jesus' example inspired the Mark's community to rethink how to be a church. What is the model of community the text offers us? The church is a community who witnesses the signs of God's Kingdom. Children are welcome - received. As we take part in educating children, we create community that resembles the face of the Kingdom, so when he or she grows up 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:**

What does the text evoke in me?

Who brought their children to Jesus? Was it the father, mother, older brother, or grandmother? What did they expect when taking the children to Jesus?

What kind of children were there for Jesus to touch - sick children, disabled, slaves, and orphans?

What does the blessing of Jesus mean for them?

What does it mean to receive children from the perspective of Jesus; and what does it mean for us today?



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### Bible Study 2

#### **Like children receiving Jesus**

**Bible Text:** 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, chief of the tax collectors to Roma. Zacchaeus 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 up the tree to see Jesus rather than being a rich and corrupt grownup. Out of curiosity, he went to see who Jesus was. An “absurd” action performed by someone from whom this was not expected. By becoming like a child, he saw himself face to face with salvation. 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, and admired by others. Suddenly he appears in a fig tree, for no other reason than curiosity about the visitor of the day.

Nowhere in the Gospel do we see that Jesus previously knew Zacchaeus. The story as presented by Luke allows us to conclude that Zacchaeus did not know Jesus before that day either. Everything that happened after climbing the tree was really a surprise to Zacchaeus. Curiosity, like that of a child was what led him to climb the tree. Therefore he entered the child “world.” He not only climbed the tree, but ran to do so. The 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 that is willing to become like a child can enter the Kingdom.

Zacchaeus second “absurd” action was to obey Jesus’ order to quickly come down from the tree and to receive the unknown visitor with joy. He portrayed the greatest “childlike” quality by obeying the command of an adult, which in this case was to quickly get down 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 still see Christian corporations or even churches themselves financially investing the offerings given to the poor, but no development of

effective programs for social change. The church is also 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 Corinthians 8: 9).

It is important to note that Zacchaeus had no selfish motivation or personal benefit; not even the offer of personal salvation. In fact, Zacchaeus’s promise to give his wealth to the poor comes after Jesus was 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 own home.

Zacchaeus’s decision to be like a child was what brought him close to Jesus and gave him access to the Kingdom: “for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven”. Jesus opened the doors of the Kingdom 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 to whom others perceived otherwise. Jesus did have a special relationship with children, and those stories are not meant to be taken as merely metaphors.

**Questions for discussion:**

What does this text evoke in me?

What do we see in Zacchaeus’ behavior that is unexpected? What are the childlike characteristics reflected in Zacchaeus?

What does it mean from the biblical perspective to be like children to receive Jesus, and what does it mean for us today?

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?

Which of our attitudes or behaviors must be transformed to become "like a child"?

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