



## CHILDREN.

Some single women **cringe** at the word, thinking they could never **handle** them.

## CHILDREN.

Some married women **long** for them, **hoping** that their empty home will one day be bustling with them.

## CHILDREN.

Some men **exploit** them, **selling** them on the streets, our streets, for sex every single day.

## CHILDREN.

According to Psalm 127:3, children are a BLESSING and a GIFT, and at Street Grace, we have devoted our lives to ensuring they are treated as such. When Street Grace first opened its doors in 2009, children who had been trafficked for sex were treated as criminals rather than the victims they really were. Traffickers received a misdemeanor, and a mere \$50 fine. In May of 2011, House Bill 200 was passed into law increasing the penalties on traffickers to include a possible life prison sentence and a \$100,000 fine.

Although we have come a long way, children are still vulnerable and are still being bought and sold for sex in our own backyards. As I reflect on the depravity of our culture today, I am reminded that for generations, children have been looked down upon, considered “less than.” We really aren’t all that different from the Roman culture that Jesus experienced when he walked the earth. As Christians, if we are called to be “Christ-followers” then it’s vital for us to understand how Jesus treated children.

In Matthew 19, we find the story of Jesus and the Little Children. Jesus is busy going about his business, you know healing people from life threatening illness, raising people from the dead. It’s just an average day as God’s son when Jesus is interrupted by parents who are bringing their children to him. Imagine the scene. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, are surrounding

Jesus, just to get a glimpse of this miracle man. As most parents today, they wanted the best for their children. They wanted them to experience Jesus firsthand. I mean his shadow alone can heal! They push to the front of the dusty crowd and tell little Samuel or little Rebecca to go and sit by the nice man only to be told by Jesus' closest friends that they are not welcome. They are not welcome? The innocent little children, created in the very image of God, are not welcome? Not only are they not welcomed, but they are rebuked (verse 13) and rejected for trying to get close to Jesus. It's almost unfathomable.

What does this encounter tell us about the Greco-Roman world and Jewish culture at that time? It tells us that children were not only de-prioritized, but they were considered a nuisance, a bother to society. Children, along with women, old men and slaves were considered physically weak and burdensome. In the time of the early church, babies were often discarded and abandoned along the side of the road to die if they were unable to add value to society. According to [Wikipedia](#), "Infanticide was common in all well studied ancient cultures, including those of ancient Greece, Rome, India, China, and Japan."

From the very beginning, the early church prohibited any such behavior because to the Christian, every infant, male or female, had value. The early church provided social services that the government did not at the time, by caring not only for their own but by caring for those vulnerable populations who could not care for themselves. They did it so well that the Galileans started getting the attention of notable leaders including emperor Julian, who loathed Christians because he suspected their benevolence had ulterior motives. According to sociologist, Rodney Stark:

*In the fourth century, the emperor Julian launched a campaign to institute pagan charities in an effort to match the Christians. Julian complained in a letter to the high priest of Galatia in 362 that the pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians, for recent Christian growth was caused by their "**moral character**, even if pretended," and by their "**benevolence toward strangers** and care for the graves of the dead." In a letter to another priest, Julian wrote, "I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans observed this and **devoted themselves to benevolence.**" And he also wrote, "The impious Galileans **support not only their poor, but ours as well**, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us." (Stark, The Rise to Christianity)*

Why would the early church go to such great lengths, at times even risking their own lives, to care for the vulnerable? I believe it's because the early church closely followed the words and actions of Jesus. After all, according to Paul in Acts 20:35, Jesus himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." And there's also the time Jesus said in Luke 6:31 to "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

And that brings me back to the story of Jesus and the children in Matthew 19. The apostles have just rebuked the parents for having the audacity to interrupt and bother Jesus with their insignificant children. Mom and dad are likely hurt, saddened and perhaps even confused. Jesus, like only he can, chooses this time in history as a teaching moment, knowing that Christians for hundreds of years to come would be able to learn from this encounter. His response? "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." As people of faith, we are called to emulate the words and actions of Jesus, which means we too are to embrace, welcome, serve, and love children. Why? Because the kingdom of heaven belongs to...**CHILDREN.**

*Cheryl DeLuca-Johnson is the President and CEO of Street Grace, a community-based organization that provides solutions for ending Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST) in the United States. Because children are priceless, Street Grace provides programs such as Not Buying It, a demand reduction partnership with Attorney General offices across the country, as well as training initiatives to educate first responders providing protective oversight to children such as teachers, counselors and law enforcement. Street Grace is working toward a day when all children can live happy, healthy, and productive lives that are free from all forms of injustice and exploitation. To learn more, visit [www.streetgrace.org](http://www.streetgrace.org).*