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## A CHILDLIKE SPIRIT

*“Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 18:4*

William Griffin in his book *Jesus for Children* tells of an exchange between Jesus and Judas concerning the children who are always following them and trying to get to Jesus. Judas tells Jesus, “You don’t have enough time to sleep. You don’t have enough time to pray. Why do you spend so much time with those noisy children?”

Jesus answers, “Because they are fun! And heaven is a lot like a playground. Unless you remember what it is like to be a child, you won’t get in.” To which Judas says, “Does that mean I have to hop, skip, and jump forever?” And Jesus answers, “No, it means you have to be curious and eager and good and honest and fair.”

An eighty-year-old woman from the hill country of Kentucky was once asked to look back over her life and reflect on what she had learned. With a kind of wistfulness she began, “If I had it to do over, if I had my life to live over, I would relax more, I would be sillier; I would take fewer things seriously, I would eat more ice cream, and go barefoot earlier in the spring. You see, I’m one of those people who live seriously and sanely hour after hour, day after day. I’ve been one of those persons who never went anyplace without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had it to do again, I’d travel lighter.”

Both of these stories highlight and dramatize the point of the text for today. In Matthew 18, Jesus underscores the importance of the childlike spirit. He says that if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven, we must become like a little child and great are those who do.

The story begins with a question about greatness. Jesus answers the question in a most unusual way. He does not speak about greatness in terms of what we have, or what we achieve, or who we know, or where we live. He surprises and, perhaps, stuns the disciples by using a child as an example of greatness.

In our time, we would think that what Jesus did with the child was cute and sweet, but in Jesus’ time, it was astonishing and outrageous. Children in the first century were regarded as naïve, uneducated, foolishly inferior, and without status and rights. Children were under the total domination of their father. This ancient

child was humble, loyal, dependent, and obedient to the father. A child as the symbol of greatness was shocking to them.

So, what did Jesus have in mind when he called disciples of yesterday and today to become like little children? What does it mean to achieve greatness through being childlike? Many concepts and characteristics come quickly into our minds. Children are teachable, reachable, eager with wonder, adventurous, wanting to grow and learn, curious, dependent, loving, and trusting.

Jesus gives us a clue to what he means here in Matthew 18 as he associates humility with childlikeness. In our text Jesus says, “whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (vs.4). But when we observe and experience children, our normal ideas of humility aren’t there.

Children aren’t always modest; they are often proud of themselves. Children don’t put themselves down; they usually feel good about themselves, if we let them. Children aren’t overly serious and overly religious; they enjoy life, taking it lightly, and can laugh at themselves.

The kind of humility Jesus saw in children was that they know they don’t know everything and are eager to learn and grow. They know they can’t do everything and are dependent upon others. They know they don’t have everything and are open to receive. Children believe easily, love generously, and live happily!

Jesus calls us to be more childlike in our lives, in our faith, and in our pursuit of happiness. So with that in mind, here are three thoughts:

**FIRST OF ALL, CHILDREN HAVE THE ABILITY TO CELEBRATE AND EMBRACE LIFE.** Young children have a joy about life, an excitement about each day, and a sense of expectancy about the future. We adults, as we grow older, often lose that joy, excitement, and expectancy. Jesus calls us to recapture this attitude about life.

Robert Fulghum, in his delightful book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, shares his experience of visiting college campuses where people are at the end of their formal education process. He compares them with children in kindergarten, who are at the beginning of their educational process. Their answer to anything you ask them to do is yes! They are confident in spirit, eager to learn, and they believe that everything is still possible for them. But, says Fulghum, if you ask a college audience the same question – “Can you draw? Can you sing? Can you dance?” – Only a small percentage of hands will go up and

even those will qualify their answer in some way. “I only sing in groups or I draw but not very well or I only slow dance or fast dance.” What happened between kindergarten and college? They lost the childlike ability to celebrate and embrace life. We become cautious, timid, and un-daring.

Jesus wants us to become like a little child – to ease up, reach out, embrace each moment, and celebrate life. Do this and we will be great and so will our lives!

**SECOND, CHILDREN HAVE THE ABILITY TO MAINTAIN A SENSE OF WONDER AND REVERENCE FOR LIFE AND THE WORLD.** Have you ever been around kids and noticed their sense of wonder and reverence for the simple things of God’s creation? They are easily fascinated by the simplest of God’s creatures – bugs, birds, butterflies, and flowers?

I remember how fascinated our three-year-old granddaughter Lea was when we visited the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta. She was filled with wonder and a sense of awe as she saw all the colorful fish there.

Emily, our one-and-a-half-year old, is fascinated by all the animals she sees when her parents take her to the zoo in Jacksonville.

Jesus says that we need to have this kind of approach and attitude about life. We need to see life’s blessings all around us and within us and one another. To become childlike is to stand before our world and before God’s grace and love with a sense of acceptance, wonder, and reverence. In this attitude is the spark of life.

**THIRD AND FINALLY, CHILDREN HAVE THE ABILITY TO BE TRUSTING AND OBEDIENT.** The child that Jesus had in mind was trusting and obedient, which is the characteristic children of God of all ages need in our relationship to our Heavenly Father. A little child is ever trusting; this is the means through which they learn about all things. They trust what we teach them; they implicitly believe us and in us. Jesus wants us to have that kind of trust in God.

A little girl had somehow received a bad cut in the soft flesh of her eyelid. The doctor knew that some stitches were needed, but he also knew that because of the location of the cut he should not use an anesthetic. He talked with the little girl, and he told her what he must do. He asked her if she thought she could stand the touch of the needle without jumping. She thought for a moment and then said simply, “I think I can if Daddy will hold me while you do it.”

So the father took his little girl in his lap, steadied her against his shoulder and held her tightly in his arms. The surgeon then quickly did his work and sewed up the cut in her eyelid. The little girl, safe in her father's arms, did not flinch. She trusted him! To become like a little child is to trust and obey.

Andrew Gilles wrote a poignant poem about a father and son praying together one night. First, the little boy confesses some little something that he had done that he felt was wrong, and then the little boy asked God to forgive him and to make him good and strong and wise like his daddy. Then the little boy dozed off into a peaceful sleep. Touched and inspired by the beautiful faith of his son, eh father then falls on his knees by the little boy's bed and prays, "O God, make me a child like my child here – pure, guileless, trusting Thee with faith sincere."

Well, do you want to be more childlike in your life, in your faith, and in your pursuit of happiness? If so, celebrate and embrace life. Maintain a sense of wonder and reverence for life and the world. And be trusting and obedient.

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