

## *Childlikeness: An Essential for Disciples*



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*Abstract:* Jesus, in his teaching from the Gospels, conveys important truths about children and their value, yet sometimes alludes to them in a figurative way to illustrate important truths about the kingdom and challenge adults to faith and spiritual growth. In a few key passages—this study will primarily focus on those from Matthew—the child is held up in Jesus’ teaching as a radical new model for understanding God and the kingdom of heaven. An understanding of children and childlikeness appears to be more important in a basic understanding of the gospel and the way of the disciple than those of Jesus’ day—as well as many in the current day—have conceived. These truths have important implications for changing Christian education ministry to both children and adults.

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### Introduction

From the record of the four gospels, most of Jesus’ teaching was directed at adults and his ministry generally was to and with adults. Similarly, the explicit model of conversion, spiritual growth, and discipleship he presents seems focused primarily on adult individuals and communities. Yet, he also has important things to say about children—truths that have elevated the status of children above that accorded them by other world religions. Those doing educational ministry with the young must take these truths into account. A number of gospel passages convey essential truths about how Jesus viewed children and his particular concern for them and, therefore, how adult believers must consider and minister to them. Among these teachings, however, children are sometimes alluded to in a figurative sense to illustrate important truths about the kingdom and serve as “radical challenges to adult Christians” (Weber, 1994, p. 5). At points, the child is held up in Jesus’ teaching as a sweepingly new model for understanding God, Christ, and the kingdom of heaven. An understanding of children and childlikeness may be much closer to and more important in a basic understanding of the gospel and the way of a disciple than those of Jesus’ day imagined, and perhaps this is true of the current day as well. The Gospel of Matthew is notable for its number of allusions to children and will be the primary biblical material for this article—

especially Matthew 18:1–6—though some support will be garnered from other New Testament passages.

It must be noted that the focus of this study, Jesus' conception of childlikeness, is only one—albeit essential—aspect of biblical discipleship. Wilkins (1992; 2004), in his extensive academic and popular study and writing on the concept of “disciple,” particularly as it is found in Matthew's gospel, gives evidence for two important assertions that this study will accept as foundational. First, being a disciple of Christ, put most simply, means to be a Christian; discipleship is living the Christian life as a follower of Jesus (Wilkins, 2004, p. 956). A special class of believer, called a disciple, is simply not a biblical concept. Consequently, if it can be shown from Jesus' teaching that childlikeness is an orientation of the disciple, then it is relevant to the life of every believer. Second, Christian discipleship and discipling relate to the whole process of becoming like the Master and “living a fully human life in this world in union with Jesus Christ and growing in conformity to his image” (Wilkins, 1992, p. 42). In the Great Commission (Matt 28:19–20), Jesus gives a clear command to “make disciples” (imperative of the Greek verb *matheteuo*). The words *go*, *baptizing*, and *teaching* all appear to be supportive processes whereby this ongoing disciple-making process takes place (Wilkins, 2004, pp. 951–952). From initial faith in Christ to maturity in him, the whole of the process is discipleship. Evidently, childlikeness and its characteristic attitudes and orientation are essential to the life of a disciple at every stage in the spiritual transformation process. This may well be a missing emphasis in Christian ministry today, the omission of which can lead to believers who in their lives and leadership do not reflect this key dimension of Christlikeness.

### The Child in Greco-Roman and Jewish Societies

The historical/cultural understanding concerning children and their value and place in broader Greco-Roman society and in Jewish society in the time of Christ will provide important background to our discussion. Bakke (2005) notes that a typical statement from one philosopher of the day reflects generally “first and foremost the negative assessment of children and childhood found in antiquity as a whole” (p. 19). At the same time, however, he asserts that children were sometimes viewed in a more positive light in terms of their potential to develop and learn—especially with an eye to their future as adults. Parents apparently “loved and took pleasure in their children. . . . They valued children as necessary to their economic survival and well-being and as heirs in whom they would live on after death” (Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 31). Much of what is stated concerning the value of children in legal documents of the day relates to them as inheritors of the family's wealth (Bakke,

2005, p. 24). Offspring in the Greco-Roman world, Weber (1994) maintains, “were generally held in low esteem, . . . had no worth in themselves, and their personalities were seldom noticed” (p. 12).

During the Old Testament era, children in Hebrew culture were viewed as a gift or heritage from the Lord (Psalm 127:3), yet apparently they were valued largely in terms of the blessing of the Lord bound up in his promises, the land, and the covenant, assured through the continuance of offspring. Weber (1994) contends, “Outside this context . . . the children as such had no special importance . . . the Israelites did not idealize children, nor did they pay any special attention to the children’s individuality” (pp. 16–17). Children were not viewed as innocent, but as sinners, and for the most part tended to “symbolize lack of understanding” (Weber, 1994, p.17). Evidence that can be found in the culture of Jesus’ time showed some appreciation of children and childhood yet included negative assessments as well (Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 36). Against this backdrop, the new light provided by Jesus’ very favorable attitude toward children stands in bold relief; in fact, it was “so new and astonishing that his disciples could not grasp it” (Weber, 1994, pp. 20–21).

### Childlikeness in Jesus’ Teaching

The initial context here for Jesus’ teaching will be the disciples’ question to him in Matthew 18:1 concerning greatness in the kingdom. Jesus turns this query around on them with one of his many reversals. First, he clarifies that one must gain entrance into the kingdom before greatness is a concern. One might wonder if “the disciples’ question is enough to cast doubt on their qualification for either entrance or greatness” (Taylor-Wingender, 1988, p. 21). As Broadus (1886) states, “While they are disputing which is to have the highest official position in the kingdom, let them see that they get into the kingdom at all” (p. 382). At this point, as stated in Matthew 18:2, Jesus stands a child in their midst. This is probably the last thing they would have expected. By this, he surprises them and arrests their attention, pointing to the child as a symbolic model for teaching. Jesus is saying, “Pay attention to, learn from, become like . . . this little child.”

It may well be that Jesus’ words about children here are among his most confounding reversals, calculated to surprise and unsettle his hearers to the core. As Zuck (1996) contends, while the scenes about Jesus and the children are emotionally moving for us, “to Jesus’ close followers, his actions were disturbing, his words were stunning” (p. 201). The Lord teaches his hearers in Matthew 18:3–4, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3–4). What does Jesus mean here and how does one enter the kingdom ac-

ording to Jesus' teaching? Zuck (1996) presents the view that childlikeness entails the following two aspects that express the essence and very nature of the child's condition: "recognizing one's low estate and acknowledging one's helplessness and dependence" (p. 206). While one finds much overlap in the discussion of these two aspects—some commentators view them as almost synonymous—it seems there is warrant for treating them separately, and the study will proceed on this basis.

The first of these aspects of childlikeness, the lowly and humble estate of the child, is expressly articulated by Jesus in Matthew 18:4. Here, the verb *humble* (Greek *tapeinosei*) means to cause something to be lowered or to reduce another person's status or importance (Lowery, 2002, p. 82). Weber (1994) maintains that this Greek word and its cognates used across the whole of Scripture generally denote an objective humility—"not a subjective state of mind, but an objective state of self-abasement and dependency" (p. 44). Gardeners will recognize the term *humus* from the French word meaning earth or ground ("Humble," 1961, p. 402). This is the natural condition of young children; since they are small, they are literally low to the earth. They have to look up to virtually everyone. This state of humility was indicative of their lowly status in Jewish society; they had little functional value since they could contribute little, and were valued most essentially for their future potential as mentioned previously. Wilkins (2004) sees in the humble state of the child,

an explicit pronouncement of grace to those who seemingly are unworthy of the kingdom. . . . Childlikeness is a characteristic of all true disciples, because it is only through God's mercy that a person can enter the kingdom and find the greatness that comes from having one's sins forgiven and being invested with kingdom life. (p. 613)

The second aspect of the child's condition in view is the dependence and utter helplessness of that child. She begins life as totally helpless and can do nothing useful for anyone, not even for herself. Children are great "receivers"; they, in fact, can do little else and are a bundle of needs (Plantinga, 2000). Within the historical/cultural context, some have contended the concept of the inheritance from the parent is clearly in view here—a right that is granted through no merit or attaining of any status of the child. This idea seems to be supported in the idea of "receiving the kingdom as a child" (Mark 10:15). Brown (1975), commenting on the Mark passage, suggests,

Jesus' pronouncement reverses the apparent understanding of the disciples. Instead of insisting that men should be mature enough to make a responsible commitment, Jesus is saying that there is a sense in which the

reverse it true. The reason why the kingdom belongs to children is not because of any subjective qualities that they may have; it lies in their objective helplessness. (p. 284)

As Derrett (1983) contends, one must see this receiving of the kingdom as a child in the Jewish cultural context of the inheritance of the blessing. Children will “receive the inheritance as a free gift subject only to the condition of their receptiveness. . . . Adults who have as qualifications the qualities which the children have by nature will take possession of the Kingdom which is theirs by the Promise.” (p. 16). Seen in this light, entrance into the kingdom becomes a matter of the intention of the Father to give salvation as a gift of grace to his children, based on their utter dependency and not merit. Up to the age of about 13, Jewish children (Greek *paidia*) were seen as outside the covenant of Judaism with its privileges as well as its obligations to keep the law (Taylor-Wingender, 1988, p. 21). Yet Jesus reverses this and designates the children of Matthew 19:14, along with others, as heirs and inheritors and already recipients, asserting that “the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” At this point, it is Jesus’ intent, according to Weber (1994) “not to teach something about the nature of children. Rather, he wanted to reveal the nature of God. God’s will is to present the children with his kingdom, and against all human calculation this is done in a totally gratuitous way” (p. 29).

#### Re-Entry into Childlikeness

The primary focus to this point has concerned the natural state and condition of the child, about which the child has no choice. Yet, what does it mean for the adult to become “childlike”? Though alluded to in the previous section, it is vital to lay this out here in more detail. Jesus might mean either that the adult should take on the actual status or condition of the child or that the individual is to choose to take on the attitude or mindset corresponding to that condition (Gundry-Volf, 2001), with its dual aspects of humility and dependence. Good support can be found that childlikeness for the adult will entail both a status and a mindset; as Gundry-Volf (2001) contends concerning humility, “‘Whoever becomes humble like this child’ . . . could refer *both* to a condition typical of children . . . and to a corresponding quality or frame of mind” (p. 41). If such is the case, humility for the adult would mean an actual state of submission to the Lord, often expressed in Scripture as brokenness and bowing low before him, recognizing one’s true condition as a sinner in the presence of and in comparison to a holy God. At the same time, humility is a quality or frame of mind corresponding to this condition—having a humble attitude. Such an orientation is highly consistent with an attitude of

repentance. This humility must find its first expression toward God himself, yet in the context of the disciples comparing themselves to each other (Matt 18:1), humbling the self before others would also be included. One is reminded of Paul's admonitions: "with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself" (Phil 2:3) and "have this attitude (or mind) in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus"—that of humble service toward others (Phil 2:5).

As the second aspect of childlikeness, dependence for the adult might also be viewed either as an actual condition of that person or an orienting attitude or frame of mind. Concerning childlikeness as a condition for entering the kingdom (Matt 18:3; cf. Mark 10:15), Gundry-Volf (2001) again lays out these options, "Either Jesus is referring to adults' adopting a *childlike status* . . . or [he] is preferring to emulating some presumed *childlike quality*" (p. 39). Following similar conclusions to those just mentioned, she contends, "Entering the reign [kingdom] of God 'as a child' thus seems to involve both a certain status—actual dependence on God—and a corresponding quality—trust—that are both 'childlike'" (p. 40). Adults must recognize that they, like children—as mentioned in the previous section—can never qualify to enter the kingdom through keeping the Law. They, in actuality, are completely helpless and dependent on the mercy of God and his gracious gift to obtain this inheritance. With this recognition by the adult, total dependence should follow with the attendant quality of a trusting attitude of faith.

Whereas for children humility and dependence are their natural condition, for the adult taking on such status and the attitudes that correspond—becoming childlike—is radically unnatural. Such a change requires a transformation or what we might call the challenge of "re-entry." In studying this phenomenon, imagery from the space program comes to mind. One of the most dangerous and difficult phases of any space mission is the time when a craft re-enters the earth's atmosphere; the space shuttle Challenger disaster attests to this. An angle too steep or too shallow will have grave consequences. In like manner, conversion/becoming like a child is fraught with difficulties—what once was natural has become foreign to the adult nature. It necessitates radical change of epic proportions. The difficulties of re-entry correspond to two tendencies. First, adults seem to have a proclivity as they age to seek status and position, leading to pride, in contrast to remaining humble. Second, as they develop, dependency and trust tend to give way, in light of growing competencies and knowledge, to an attitude toward the Lord of self-sufficiency and independence—the antithesis of faith. Wilkins (2004) sees a similar contrast in Matthew 11:25 between those who refuse to repent and the Twelve, metaphorically referred to as "babes" or little children (Greek *ne-pios*); "the contrast is between those whose pride and self-sufficiency have caused them to reject Jesus' message and those whose humility and recogni-

tion of their own neediness allow them to be open to God's unqualified care through Jesus' announcement of the arrival of the kingdom" (p. 421).

What Jesus is talking about here is at the core of the gospel. As Weber (1994) affirms, "Whoever wants to enter the kingdom must receive it as children do. This is not the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, but it is the heart of it" (p. 41). Since the disciples are Jesus' audience for the declaration of Matthew 18:3, Wilkins (2004) claims, "This encounter is an important time for the disciples to check themselves. If they do not yet truly believe, even though they may be disciples in name, they must repent, be converted, and enter the kingdom of heaven" (p. 613). Turning from one's natural tendencies and becoming childlike may have parallels with other formulations of the basic gospel message. While the concept of being "born again" of John 3:3 carries other meanings, especially that of regeneration, and is not the primary emphasis in John's gospel, some (Brown, 1975, p. 284; Weber, 1994, p. 26) see in it something parallel to Jesus' allusion to a return to early childhood. The concepts of repentance and belief (seen together for example in Mark 1:15) are very similar in emphasis to the dual aspects of humility and dependence entailed in childlikeness. Lowery (2002) views these two as interwoven in Matthew 18:4, where "the idea of becoming like a child also fits the notion of repentance, where one turns away from self-reliance to trust and confidence in God" (p. 82).

In attempting to understand this spiritual phenomenon, one might make two observations. First, without question, re-entry is difficult—theologically we might say impossible—unless the Father draws that person (John 6:44) and the Spirit gives life (John 6:63). Second, it would also appear that such an experience might become increasingly difficult the longer an individual resists such change and the farther individuals are removed from the condition of literal childhood. We will later examine the phenomenon—termed *childishness*—as a state resistant to spiritual change. Barna (2003) contends, "If people do not embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim" (p. 34). While some would take issue with this pessimistic evaluation of the prospects for adult evangelism as well as with Barna's research itself, many working with youth and adults in ministry would agree that generally the degree of openness to the gospel would appear to decrease—tender hearts can harden—with age and life experience, though it might be difficult to quantify this change.

#### Disciples' Receptivity to the Childlike

Jesus continues to develop this concept of childlikeness further when he states in Matthew 18:5, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives Me." In this pericope, Jesus has already presented himself as an example of

one who warmly receives or welcomes the children (Taylor-Wingender, 1988, p. 22). His disciples are to follow his model and welcome them “in his name”—in his stead or just as he himself would receive them in a spirit of hospitality. Jesus has now extended the meaning of “little children” beyond the scope of the young only. As Wilkins (2004) states,

The ‘little child’ is the true disciple who has humbly received God’s enabling mercy to enter the kingdom and who is now serving God. Jesus harks back to the parallel saying in the mission mandate (10:40–42), where he stated that whoever ‘receives’ (Greek: *dechomai*; ‘welcome’ in 18:5) childlike disciple-missionaries who carry the message of Jesus, receive Jesus himself. (p. 614)

The one who heeds Jesus’ words here and welcomes children and other “little ones” likely has—in the true character of a disciple—become childlike; this individual values, accepts, and appreciates those who are in that same childlike condition. Otherwise, one would be unlikely to be welcoming, viewing the little ones as merely hindrance or burden. Jesus’ words are full of irony, because as Gundry-Volf (2001) contends, “children occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder, and caring for children was a low-status activity [but in the context] . . . the humblest service characterizes the greatest. Jesus thus redefines care for children as a mark of greatness” (p. 43). Since unquestionably the Father values such “little ones” (Matt 18:10), he is looking for others who share his heart. Luke 1:17—citing Malachi 4:6—indicates one effect of John the Baptist’s ministry would be “to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children . . . so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Hearts that are concerned for children and other disciples serving the Lord evidently are also likely to be prepared to receive the Messiah in his childlike manifestation.

As Zuck (1996) states, “Children are like his representatives, for they, like him, are humble. The Jews believed that the messenger of a king was to be treated like the king himself. Therefore, the child was to be received as if he were Jesus” (p. 209). Such a disciple evidently values and vicariously welcomes Jesus as he has identified with the humble and dependent state of the child. In commenting on the parallel passage in Mark, Gundry-Volf (2001) contends that the welcomed child is a representative of the Lord in a very particular way. Since the child is weak and needy, “the child thus represents Jesus as a humble, suffering figure. Welcoming the child signifies receiving Jesus and affirming his divinely given mission as the suffering Son of Man” (p. 45). Showing hospitality to such little ones—“the least of these”—and having it counted as service to Jesus himself shows a strong parallel with the eschatological passage Matthew 25:11–46 concerning the final judgment. At this time, true disciples will be revealed, and they will finally inherit the kingdom. To



the extent that they cared for the Lord's children, Christ counts this as done unto him and pronounces it the ultimate evidence of their discipleship.

### The Childlikeness of Jesus

As he does with the servant model (Matt 20:26–28), Jesus might well have presented himself as the archetype of such attitudes as humility at the heart of childlikeness; yet, in Matthew 18 the Lord chooses to use the example of a child instead (Taylor-Wingender, 1988, p. 22). He makes a fascinating connection between himself, the child, and childlikeness here, in his clear identification with the child in their midst. Taking care not to overstep the text here Christologically, one might reasonably make a number of theological inferences. First, Jesus knew experientially what it was to be a literal child and to be childlike. Seven times in Matthew 2, the young Jesus is called a *paidion* or small child (Weber, 1994, p. 77), the same term used for the child whom he stands in the midst of the disciples in Matthew 18:2 (in Matt 19:13–14, children are referred to with the plural *paidia*). He does not speak from a remote or romantic conception of the child, since he experienced a real human childhood. Second, he never experienced a departure from childlikeness as he characterized it; his life and ministry were epitomized by humility and dependence on the Father. Because he never sinned, he never succumbed to a prideful grasping for status nor did he ever operate out of a smug self-sufficiency. He had no need, therefore, to go through the re-entry process into childlikeness.

Before moving to one final inference about Jesus and childlikeness, we need to present evidence that Jesus does indeed fit the pattern of the child in the two aspects we have described. Unquestionably, humility characterizes Jesus, both in terms of the humble state of his incarnation as well as in his attitude toward others—clearly described in Philippians 2:5–8. Matthew 11:28–30 is an important passage that may lend some vital support to our earlier discussion about childlikeness and entrance into the kingdom, as Jesus invites,

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my load is light.

One might ask, “Why might they be weary and heavy laden?” Wilkins (2004) gives a possible solution here; he explains that the yoke (Greek *zugos*) “was used metaphorically to describe one individual’s subjection to another. In that latter sense, the yoke is a common metaphor in Judaism for the law” (p.

423). Keeping the law involves great labor—the Jewish leaders were noted for heaping great burdens on the people and never doing anything to help bear them (Luke 11:46)—yet it is not the way into the kingdom; “his [Jesus’] yoke—a metaphor for discipleship to him—promises rest from the weariness and burden of religious regulation and human oppression” (p. 424). He teaches those who would heed his call to discipleship to “take My yoke and learn from Me, for I gentle and humble in heart.” Jesus, coming in the humble form of a human, has won freedom from bondage for all who will receive it, and such humility, characterized in the later Matthean passage as childlikeness, is a dominant characteristic of his ministry. The disciple must learn from his example and likewise be humble and dependent on the Lord—in submission to his yoke—in similar fashion to what was described earlier as becoming like a child.

The second aspect of childlikeness, that of dependence on the Father and submission to his will, is clearly shown by the Son in the Gospels, most notably in John, as well as in the Epistles, especially in Hebrews. Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane (Matt 26:36–46) reveals this in great detail. He entrusts himself totally into the care and wisdom of the Father. Wilkins (2004) affirms, “Jesus has demonstrated a complete confidence in his Father’s sovereign power and perfect will throughout his life, so at this moment of greatest temptation, he turns to his Father for guidance” (p. 841). In this sense, Hebrews 12:2 calls Jesus “the author and perfecter of faith,” perfectly exemplifying confident trust and dependence.

Finally, as one final theological inference, one might conjecture by his actions and attitudes in Matthew 18 and 19 as well as in other passages, that Jesus might actually have felt more of a commonality and close connection with these children than with many of the adults and the adult attitudes that surrounded him. He could easily identify with them on a basic human level. While these considerations exceed the scope of the present article, the study of childlikeness from a Christological perspective would appear to hold great promise.

### Conditions Conducive to Childlikeness

In continuing to examine childlikeness and the idea of re-entry, one might ask if Jesus gives any clarification about those in the adult world who might be predisposed to childlikeness. Through Matthew and the other gospels, it would appear that certain groups or classes of people are seen as childlike. Among the Beatitudes, those described as “poor in spirit” (5:3), as “those who mourn” (5:4), and as “gentle (humble)” are promised the kingdom and blessing and would be viewed among the childlike. Jesus’ call in Matthew 11:28–30, mentioned above, is to those who are tired, burdened,

broken, and in great need of rest. Referring to children in Matthew 19:14, Jesus testifies, "The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Besides children, he seems to be referring to the marginalized, the sick, the poor, the lost, "sinners," and the like. Speaking figuratively, he calls them "the least of these" and "little ones." This is perfectly logical given the defining conditions of childhood and childlikeness under consideration. It is just such individuals who understand their humble condition and who grasp their need to depend on God and on others. These appear to be most open to the Lord and to entering into the kingdom of heaven—they seem more disposed than many others toward a childlike heart. When criticized by the Pharisees for associations with sinners and tax-gathers, Jesus observed, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are ill" (Matt 9:12). One's own need, deficiency, or suffering appears to have place in opening people to the need for re-entry, since these often produce humility toward and dependence upon the Lord. Paul certainly offers it as an antidote for self-exaltation in himself (2 Cor 12:7). Yet, it must also be noted that the opposite response to suffering may also occur as people become hardened, bitter, and closed to spiritual change.

It is at this very point that children appear to serve another unique role in teaching adults and bringing them to a place of re-entry. It may not be the suffering of the adult, but the observation and connection with the suffering of children, especially one's own, which are instrumental in such change. If a person cannot be moved to compassion and tenderness by the image of a suffering child, that individual is hardened indeed. Parents can readily understand this, especially if they have had children who have been seriously ill, injured, or otherwise distressed. While this does not appear to be Matthew's express purpose in including these particular incidents, the narrative provides a number of cases where parents bring their children to Jesus for his healing work. A first example, beginning in Matthew 9:18, is the case of the synagogue official (called Jairus in Mark and Luke) who looks to Jesus to heal his daughter from death. One would expect an attitude of pride toward Jesus from such a Jewish ruler—typical of those in religious power—yet because of his child, he humbles himself, kneeling before the Master. He puts trust in the Lord to intervene, and the girl is raised from the dead. Additional examples are two other concerned parents, a Gentile woman (Matt 15:22ff) and a father (Matt 17: 14ff); each has a child afflicted by a demon. In each situation, the text indicates the humility of each before Jesus, their brokenness over the child's suffering, and their attitude of faith on behalf of the child. Jesus pays attention to their pleas and, in each case, delivers their children from bondage. In each of these three miracles, while the individuals differ, they each express the attitudes of childlikeness appropriate to a re-entry experience. Having had a daughter with a number of serious athletic injuries with

resulting chronic pain, my wife and I can identify with these parents in the biblical text; we have often been brought to brokenness and a sense of utter dependence on the Lord because of this.

#### Childlikeness Contrasted with Childishness

At other points in Matthew's text, one finds a contrast to childlikeness and openness to re-entry with the opposite stance of resistance to such change and possibly an attitude of disdain for children and those like them. Jesus had sobering words of warning and judgment for such individuals who cause "one of these little ones to stumble" (Matt 18:6). His disciples are not to be guilty of "despising one of these little ones" (Matt 18:10), knowing the value and importance God places on them (see also Matt 18:14). When children were brought to Jesus for his blessing (Matt 19:13–15), he chastised his disciples for hindering those who attempted to bring them. In a parallel pericope, the Mark 10:14 text explains that Jesus was "indignant" toward his disciples for standing in the children's way—"the only place in the whole New Testament where it is written that Jesus was indignant" (Weber, 1994, p. 24). As an aside, the only other place in the biblical text expressly stating that Jesus was angry concerned the lack of compassion of the Jewish leaders toward the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:5). The Lord had strong feelings about those who were unfriendly and unsympathetic toward children and the childlike.

Earlier in the gospel (Matt 11:16ff), Jesus had used an illustration from the common play of children to portray the antithesis of childlikeness. Wilkins (2004) explains the teaching as follows:

Jesus intriguingly compares the innocence of child's play with the deviousness of this generation of adults who are playing an evil game. The difference is between *childlike*, which is positive (cf. 18:1–5), and *childish*, which is essentially selfish, petty, and insistent on having one's own way. (p. 418)

The Lord compares "this generation"—those who were unbelieving and un-receptive toward the reign of God—to petulant and selfish children playing a game, wanting their own way in everything and wanting to be in control of others. John the Baptist and Jesus were each an affront to these and in their self-centered thinking they could rationalize the rejection of both. This attitude of "childishness" seems to capture perfectly the attitude of those who would not be childlike and submit in humble dependence to God nor appreciate this quality in Christ and "the least of these." A humble Messiah who would serve selflessly and entrust himself to the Father, rather than exert po-

litical and military power and control was either inconceivable to them or an offense because of the proud and self-sufficient condition of their hearts.

While one could cite numerous biblical instances of those with such an attitude, a few examples of the childish in Matthew follow. The Twelve seem to fit such a characterization quite well in their competition for power and status (Matt 18:1; Matt 20:20–28). The rich young ruler went away from Jesus quite sad “because he was very wealthy” (Matt 19:16ff). Jesus’ comments that follow his departure indicate how difficult it is for the rich—the self-sufficient and independent of God—to enter the kingdom. Finally, the chief priests and scribes childishly exhibit jealousy and indignation toward the Lord—rather than awe and praise of God—over Jesus’ miraculous healings in the temple (Matt 21:15ff.). That these miracles were obviously from God, even to the point that the very littlest children—even babes (Greek *thelazo*)—could recognize their divine origin, attests to the blindness and resistance that accompany such childish attitudes.

#### Childlikeness in Maturing Disciples

Childlikeness—humility and dependence on God in both actual status and attitude—are requisite to entering the kingdom, as was stated earlier. Yet Matthew also presents these as essential for all who would continue as disciples, consistent with the model of discipleship Jesus presented. As Wilkins (2004) states regarding Matthew 19:14,

Childlikeness is not only a prerequisite for entrance to the kingdom but is also a necessary lifetime characteristic for Jesus’ disciples. As weak, defenseless, vulnerable children, they must continue to maintain dependence on their heavenly Father for the purpose, power, and significance of their life of discipleship. (p. 646)

To return to the initial point of the study, when Jesus is asked about “greatness in the kingdom of heaven,” he presents the child in their midst as an object lesson. One possible interpretation of his response is this—true greatness and growth toward such stature in this kingdom comes with the very same attitude required for entrance into it. Jesus might well be saying, “When you have discovered the way into the kingdom—and what the Father truly values in his children—and you progress and grow to be great, you will learn that you are not very far from where you started.” Such statements to his adult hearers were confusing at best and offending at worst—in parallel with similar such reversals expressed by Jesus. These surprised and amazed his audiences, as when he averred, “whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant” (Matt 20:26). Since servant-leader terminology has been used exten-

sively in the church today, this imagery may well have lost some of its shock-value in contemporary evangelical culture. More unexpected and surprising would be a *child-leader* model. Such a characterization would fly in the face of “top-down” views of leadership emphasizing strong, self-made, and self-reliant individuals. Jesus, in speaking of childlikeness in the same context as greatness, is not referring to disciples who are spineless, weak, or indecisive, so obviously one must qualify his statements to clarify what Jesus did *not* mean. Childlikeness was not meant by him to connote such characteristics as instability (Eph 4:14) or immature thinking (1 Cor 14:10), often associated with children and obviously antithetical to sound leadership. As was explained earlier, the primary focus here would be upon the leader’s humility toward and dependence upon God himself, and the nature of one’s attitude in leadership toward others would be a secondary, though important, focus.

#### Childlikeness in Mature Relationship with God

Mature believers come to epitomize such an orientation developed over a lifetime of reliance on and relationship with the Father, often expressed in their prayer life. For example, David in Psalm 131, in humble childlike dependence on the Lord, attests, “O Lord, my heart is not proud, or my eyes, haughty. . . . Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child rests against his mother. My soul is like a weaned child within me” (vv. 1–2). This humble dependence on God in light of his great mercy is also notable in the writing of the apostles, probably nowhere more striking than in the mature Peter counseling his readers, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” He advises, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (1 Pet 5:5–6). What divine irony and testimony to the transforming power of the Spirit that these words were spoken by one who earlier in life had often been so proud and childish. Paul as well affirms through his own experience (2 Cor 12:9) that spiritual power is made evident in the life of the leader only through total dependence on the strength and grace of God.

Other examples of childlikeness can be noted in later and even contemporary Christian leaders. The image of himself as a helpless and submissive child was a favorite of Jonathan Edwards as he meditated on the relationship he had with his Heavenly Father. Edwards’s (1935) desires, as he himself expressed them, were as follows:

that I might be nothing, and that God might be ALL, that I might become as a little child. . . . I very often think with sweetness, and longings, and pantings of the soul, of being a little child, taking hold of Christ, to be led by him through the wilderness of the world. (pp. 63–64, 67)

Using a 20th century example, Myra and Shelly (2005) write that Dr. Billy Graham's life and ministry are characterized by a very evident dependence on the Lord and complete lack of pretense in spite of his almost iconic stature among evangelicals. He appears uncomfortable with any focus on himself and his celebrity, desiring that nothing detract from Christ and the simplicity of the gospel message he has so faithfully preached. A number of the mature Christians whom I most admire—my father, Cliff Barrows of the Graham evangelistic team, faculty colleagues at Talbot School of Theology—exemplify this same self-effacing humility and childlike trust in the Lord.

### Childlikeness in Leading Others

While the central focus of childlikeness is dependent humility manifested toward God, such a mindset must also be shown toward fellow disciples. One could hardly imagine a leader who was genuinely humble toward the Lord and yet prideful toward others. In fact, Peter, directing his teaching toward church elders and followers, instructs, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another" (1 Pet 5:5). This orientation would likely be expressed by mature leaders as a healthy interdependence and team orientation, as an expression of the Body of Christ working in harmony, and in that sense would be differentiated from the manner in which one would show ultimate faith in and dependence upon the Lord. The Apostle Paul, in a number of passages (e.g., Eph 4:2; Col 3:12), teaches the necessity of humility toward others as well as interdependence (1 Cor 12) among maturing believers.

Some years ago, in seeking to develop a model of spiritual teaching and leadership, Kevin Lawson and I explored the practices and characteristics of great athletic coaches (Leyda & Lawson, 2000). In one portion of our research, we formulated four different clusters of attributes, summarizing essential qualities identified by outstanding coaches themselves: competence, consistency, inspiration, and caring. In reflecting later on these four clusters, I conceived of a fifth dimension, missing in this secular model and seen only against the backdrop of Scripture: a humble interdependent attitude toward those led. One subject of our study, the great UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, is a notable example of such a dimension. When we spent an evening with Coach Wooden, his primary interest resided with former players, their lives and successes, and principles for effective living. He deflected much of the questioning about himself, apparently not wanting to be too much the focus of discussion. Another sports figure personifying humble interdependence is Tony Dungy, coach of the 2007 Super Bowl champion Indianapolis Colts. Dungy, like Wooden a man of Christian faith, possesses a soft-spoken, self-effacing manner and team orientation—a refreshing contrast to many prominent sports coaches and managers who "lord it over" their players and staff. His demeanor appears to enhance his leadership, and he has

earned the utmost respect from his players. Through a series of struggles including the tragic death of his son by suicide, one might say that Dungy has been brought to a place of childlikeness before the Lord, and this appears to be expressed in his attitude toward those who play and work for him. Reflecting on an athletic career ending with major college football, I have vivid memories of coaches who exemplified either childlike or childish attitudes—my experiences under their differing leadership stand in bold contrast to each other.

Piper (2002) pleads with Christian leaders to adopt a perspective and attitudes consistent with Jesus' teachings as expressed in this study. He chides some of these for making pastoral ministry "professional" by robbing it of its biblical and spiritual essence and heart; for, as he attests, "There is no professional childlikeness (Matt 18:3), there is no professional tenderheartedness" (pp. 1–2). The wrecked ministries of those leaders brought low through a prideful and independent spirit—the antithesis of childlikeness—have strewn the contemporary landscape of Christian service and reveal our neglect of Christ's teachings.

#### Application to Ministry

Any one of Jesus' points regarding childlikeness taken alone may not appear radically new or earthshaking. Taken as a whole, however, they present rich perspectives, if not a new paradigm, for disciple-making and can aid in conceiving of Christian education ministry with children and adults in fresh new ways. First, regarding children, one absolutely cannot miss the point that children matter deeply to God and the church has too long relegated ministry to them to a second- or third-tier priority level. The message cannot be declared more emphatically than Jesus has said it in Matthew 18 and 19, that children—and those like them—are on his heart, and he decrees they must be on the heart of those who call themselves his disciples. A growing number of voices (Barna, 2003; Stafford, 2005) are calling for pastors, church boards, and other Christians of influence to treasure children, placing them as a top ministry priority. In terms of practical strategies, this will mean faithfully preaching and teaching these biblical texts regarding children as a solid foundation for service to them. Also, children's ministry staff members must be accorded equal status with other ministry professionals and paid accordingly; their budgets must be on a par with other vital church programs. Volunteers in children's programs must be valued and given sufficient training for their crucial roles. Additionally, seminaries and Christian colleges should take advantage of opportunities in this growing field and meet the need for more extensive training of children's ministry professionals.

Second, for parents and children's workers, understandings of childlikeness can open new perspectives as they seek to see life through a child's eyes.



Jesus used a child to teach great truths to his disciples; teachable adults can learn great lessons from children. By literally and figurative moving to the level of the child, such lessons can, in turn, help the adult more effectively minister to little ones, whether through kneeling or sitting at their eye level, using the children's vocabulary, or simply listening and empathizing with their concerns.

Third, Jesus' teachings serve as a "reality check" for all disciples, and especially Christian education workers and ministry leaders, regarding faith and spiritual growth. Conformity to the image of Christ can be gauged to some degree by the qualities of childlikeness and the extent to which that individual values children and others who are marginalized. One might even devise a self-inventory of questions such as the following that informally assesses life change. To what degree does my prayer life reflect a genuine humility before God and a trusting faith in his provision? Do I have a childlike receptivity to God as I plan my teaching or other ministry endeavors and a trust in him for the results? Do I regularly ask forgiveness of others, including children, when I have been wrong or caused them to stumble? To what degree am I involved with or supportive of ministry to children and those like them? Do I have a proud or independent spirit directed toward anyone in my family, work, or ministry? Similarly, a few such questions could prove crucial in the selection process for those choosing pastoral staff, volunteers, or other leadership. Qualities of childlikeness are central to the life and character of leaders and have far-reaching implications for countering a proud, independent spirit that is so detrimental to Christian leadership.

Finally, the concepts of childlikeness and of re-entry may aid in new ways of presenting the gospel message. In an increasing complex world with an abundance of useless information, a presentation of the gospel must clarify the salient issues through images and terminology that can be readily understood. The essence of coming to Jesus is simple—so simple a child can do it—and this means virtually anyone can come. The requisite humility and faith depend much more on willingness and openness than on capacity. This is one of the great strengths of the Christian faith; a person is saved by faith in Christ and his work and not by human merit. One can only inherit and thus gain entrance to the kingdom of heaven in the same manner as a little child would—humbly receiving it as a gift of grace. Additionally, the concept of re-entry into childlikeness may serve to highlight the processes and struggles that many adults experience in coming to initial faith in Christ as well as in progressing on their spiritual journey. Faithful witnesses need to pay attention to the means by which the Holy Spirit brings people to a point of re-entry and sensitively cooperate in the enterprise. Evidently, God has often used the lives and examples of little ones—and even their suffering—to open the hearts of parents and other adults to the need for humble repentance and faith in Christ.

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