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## Jesus and the Children in the Gospels

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"A mother lovingly watches her 3 year old play in the warm sand of the beach. She becomes absorbed in her daughter's pure enjoyment of the sunshine, her simple understanding of the world around her, and her utmost delight in the sand flowing between her fingers and toes. She wonders how she could become more like her little child, careless and free. I have also pondered the virtue of being child-like, and have thought about the words of Jesus regarding children. There are several portions of Scripture in the Gospels that portray how Jesus views children. I would like to explore them in more depth. I am interested in this topic because I am planning to be a pediatric nurse and because I work with inner city children as a youth leader. I think there is something about children that most adults admire, so hopefully I am not alone in my quest to learn more about Jesus and children."

### **\*\*\* Jesus and the Children in the Gospels**

Maryana Misula

A mother lovingly watches her 3 year old play in the warm sand of the beach. She becomes absorbed in her daughter's pure enjoyment of the sunshine, her simple understanding of the world around her, and her utmost delight in the sand flowing between her fingers and toes. She wonders how she could become more like her little child, careless and free. I have also pondered the virtue of being child-like, and have thought about the words of Jesus regarding children. There are several portions of Scripture in the Gospels that portray how Jesus views children. I would like to explore them in more depth. I am interested in this topic because I am planning to be a pediatric nurse and because I work with inner city children as a youth leader. I think there is something about children that most adults admire, so hopefully I am not alone in my quest to learn more about Jesus and children.

In an analytical paper, I would like to explore the several instances recorded in the gospels where Jesus focused his teaching and ministry on little children. It amazes me that this great Teacher, the Messiah, the One that people crowded to by the thousands to hear, showed such respect for the children He encountered. I would like to analyze the status of children in the Jewish culture in which Jesus taught, and the lessons that Jesus taught regarding child-like qualities. My thesis is that the gospels present several instances in which Jesus focuses on children and their unique characteristics to teach adults a certain lesson.

I would like to focus my paper on the three specific portions of Scripture. The first main point comes from Jesus' blessing of children in the gospel of Mark, chapter 10 verses 13-16. The second major area of study in the paper is from Jesus' invitation to adults to become child-like in Matthew 18:1-6. The last point focuses on the famous Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew chapters 5,6, and 7: I will explore how this segment of Scripture relates to the qualities in children that Jesus admired.

### **1. Jesus Blessed the Little Children**

In the gospel of Mark, we find an incredible account of Jesus' encounter with children:

And they were bringing children to Him that He might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, He was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to Me; don't hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.' And He took them in His arms and blessed them. (Mark 10.13-16 ).

The disciples were rebuking the children because they felt it was the right thing to do. After all, children were considered to hold the lowest status in society in the ancient world (Barton and Muddiman 907). Instead of conforming to this societal norm, however, Jesus contradicted the disciples' expectations and became angry at his followers for not allowing the children to come to Him. In commenting on this portion of Scripture, Bruce writes, “ The disciples felt it to be an unwarrantable intrusion on their Master's time to have children brought to Him to have Him touch them. Their rebuking those who conducted them to Jesus for this purpose earned a rebuke from Jesus for themselves” (1170). Not only were the disciples rebuked, but the Bible records that Jesus actually became angry. “This is one of the few occasions where Mark records that Jesus was

indignant, and it is interesting to see the cause. We might have thought that other matters were more important than the spiritual welfare of children, but Jesus valued them and often uses children as examples for us” (Wenham et al. 966). Although His reaction is surprising, it is also characteristic of Christ to defend those who could not defend themselves, to lift up those who have been humbled by others.

Christ stated that the reason the children should be allowed to come to Him is because the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these kids. It is interesting to analyze what characteristics are specific to that of children that made them a great example for Jesus' listeners. “The Kingdom is for those who are like children in the ancient world, i.e. the poor, the hungry, the dispossessed, those without rights and without any esteem amongst their contemporaries” (Barton and Muddiman 907). Children did not have money or own property so they would not be attached to it as the young rich man in Matthew 19.21-22 who was saddened by the idea of selling his many belongings for charity. “Jesus' meaning, probably, was that the kingdom of God belonged to people who, though not literally children, were imbued with such characteristics of children as trust and receptiveness” (Bruce 1170). As adults, we are often the opposite, we are fearful, distrusting, and unreceptive and teach our children to be the same. Although it is prudent to teach children to be wise and discerning, Jesus, in this passage, focused on the virtue of the trust and simplicity that allowed the childlike at heart to receive the kingdom of God. As adults, we have learned that we must work for what we own, and that without working, one does not get paid. Young children, on the other hand, have not yet developed this concept for they are dependent on their parents for food, shelter, and safety. “Followers of Jesus can only receive the kingdom i.e. accept God's

rule as King, if they too become like this: they too must recognize their radical dependence on God for all they have and all they are and they must give up all claims to rights over others in the world” (Barton and Muddiman 907). It is these attributes of trust, dependence and simplicity that allow children to receive gifts without guilt or the feeling of debt. In our culture, adults exchange gifts at holidays and it is unusual to buy a gift for someone who will not buy a gift in return, while children receive freely, having no means of buying a gift in return. “Children allow people to give them things apart from any thought of merit or dessert on their part; and it is only by adopting such a childlike attitude that people can appropriate the blessedness of the kingdom of God”(Bruce 1170). In blessing the children, Christ was explaining to His listeners that salvation cannot be received with the attitude of guilt and debt. How foolish that we think we could repay God just as if an infant could repay its parent! Sermons are often preached on the value of child like faith, and that is exactly what Jesus was alluding to in this passage. Salvation is much too large of a gift we could ever repay; it is a gift to be joyously received. “Perhaps this is why the word 'children' is sometimes used to mean 'simple believers' in the gospels” (Wenham et al. 966).

## **2. Jesus' Invitation to Become Like Children**

Matthew records a dialog between Christ and His disciples regarding children:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to Him a child He put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me” (18:3-5)

It is natural for us to wonder how valuable we are in a group. We are competitive in nature, and want to be commended and praised as better than others. “Any human society is concerned to establish a proper 'pecking order,' and the gospels record several disputes among the disciples on this subject. Over against all conventional ideas of importance Jesus offered the model of the little child (Wenham et al. 927). After the disciples gave up family, jobs, and reputations to follow Christ, how could a child be of greater status? “In a well-ordered society and family a little child, with all its faults, will not be concerned with any scale of greatness” (Bruce 1138). On the scale of power and influence, children are usually not considered on top. “The point is not that children are self-consciously humble but they are, within society, without much status or position” (Barton and Muddiman 867). The commentary by Wenham et al. also explains the humility that is referred to in this passage, “The point was not any supposedly childish qualities of innocence or unselfishness but the status of the child at the bottom of the pecking order, subject to grown up authority, dependent, and powerless” (927). Once again, Jesus surprised the expectations of His disciples and put a child as an example in the middle of the confused men who were seeking greatness. Repeatedly, Christ considers the weak to be strong and humble to be powerful. “To accept this lowest rank (humble himself) is to be great, and to treat the least prominent as the most important is to echo the attitude of Jesus. Such an attitude is not natural; it involves a radical change” (Wenham et al. 928). Those who desire to enter the kingdom of heaven must somehow undertake this unnatural transformation. “One should become like little children, for only by this will one enter the kingdom. One should humble oneself as a child, for in the kingdom the humble will be great” (Barton and Muddiman 907). This humbling of

oneself is not an easy concept to grasp, and even a harder theme to put into practice. Bruce puts it this way, “The sense [of the phrase] is not [that a man] humbles himself as this little child humbles himself but humbles himself until he is like this little child” (1139).

It is also interesting to look at this passage from another point of view, if even possible a heavenly kind of a view. If we could pretend to think like God would, for just a moment, it is interesting how different things become. It seems that looking at this passage in that manner helps to reconcile the harshness of it. “God is so great, that any differences of rank in His kingdom must pale into insignificance, when seen in His light”(Bruce 1139). Indeed, when the greatness of God is considered, even the question in Mark 18:1, “Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” becomes somewhat silly. “In addition His scale of values is so different from man's that for Him the reception of a child can be ranked as the reception of Jesus” (Bruce 1139). Matthew 18:5 reads, “Whoever receives one such child in My name, receives Me,” and the gospel of Mark records a very similar verse in chapter 9 verse 37, except that it adds “and whoever receives Me, receives not Me, but Him who sent Me”. What an amazing thought, that we could receive God Himself by welcoming a child!

### **3. The Sermon on the Mount**

Although the Sermon on the Mount does not mention children directly, the two points discussed above are not complete without an understanding of the teaching that Jesus gives in Matthew 5-7. The sermon is long, but segments that apply most to a child-

like character are the ones that have to do with the beatitudes, prayer, possessions and worry.

The beatitudes begin with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:4 ). “Blessed are the poor in spirit means much the same as 'blessed are the meek’” (Barton and Muddiman 853). Once again we see that those who are humble are promised entrance into the kingdom of heaven which is contrary to our normal human thinking. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:5). We see purity as yet another attribute in children, a virtue highly regarded in the eyes of Christ. Bruce notes ,“The stress continues on character rather than works” (1124). The beatitudes as a whole are thus summarized by Barton and Muddiman, “ Those who are without power or status and who depend upon God will be given the kingdom of heaven and inherit the earth when things are turned upside down at the last judgment ...those who are on top here are on the bottom there, and those who are on the bottom here are on top there” (853). This heavenly order is what prompted Jesus to bless the children in Mark 10 and to point out a child when asked who would be the greatest in Matthew 18.

The passage on prayer included in the Sermon on the Mount portrays how childlikeness is precious to God. Jesus encourages the people to not pray long, complicated prayers, or to show off prayer in front of an audience but instead to “Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who is in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:6). He encourages simplicity and the openness that is found between a father and his child, as “Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:8). We must pray knowing that we are heard, as a child that

has the full ear of its loving father. “True prayer is not technique nor a performance, but a relationship” (Wenham et al. 913). In the Lord's prayer, “a model of brevity,” recorded in the following few verses, one particular passage jumps out as being child like (Barton and Muddiman 856). “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6.10-11). The first part of the passage implies surrender and dependence, much like a child with a parent, knowing the parent is in charge and being submissive to that authority. The second part implies the prayer for the basic needs, a child-like prayer. The meaning of the word *daily* is uncertain, but according to Bruce, can mean “daily ration,” or “bread for the immediate future” (1127). Prayer is also mentioned later in the sermon, “ Ask and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you”(Matthew 7:7). Persistence is a characteristic seen in children who are not ashamed to continue asking until they receive an answer. “Persistence in prayer (the imperatives are all in the present tense, which suggests continuous asking, seeking and knocking, not just a single request) can expect an answer not because of the technique used but because of the God who is being addressed” (Wenham et al. 913).

The next passage of interest describes the importance of not becoming attached to possessions. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is there your heart will be also” (Matthew 19-21). “Oriental treasure normally consisted of silver, gold, and also costly clothing” (Bruce 1128). These are all treasures children were not concerned with since they did not possess anything. “To be primarily concerned with material possessions not only shows the

wrong perspective but is also foolish, since such possessions cannot last” (Wenham et al. 912). Jesus presented children as an example to adults because they were unattached to materialistic possessions.

Lastly, the Sermon on the Mount describes the foolishness of worry. “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear” (Matthew 6.25). Perhaps this is why that mother was so absorbed in her daughter's careless play on the beach. “What is forbidden here is *worry*, not responsible provision for one's own and one's family needs” (Wenham et al. 913). Young children are unconcerned with where their food comes from, as long as they eat, or what they look like, as long as they are dressed. They are not anxious about things because they know that they taken care of by their parents. “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to you children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him!” (Matthew 7:11).

“If even human fathers, who are evil (a recognition of the essential sinfulness of humanity), can be relied on to do what is best for their children, how much more can God?” (Wenham et al. 913). In contract to adults, children are not afraid to ask for help. They are unashamed of being needy, because they realize they are dependent fully on the support their parents provide. “The basis of the disciple's confidence, in contrast with anxiety of the pagans, lies in recognizing God as your heavenly Father. The proper attitude then is to put God first and to trust him for our practical needs” (Wenham et al. 913).

## **Conclusion**

In his ministry, as it is recorded in the NT, Christ has several great experiences with children. It is amazing that He not only blessed them, He used them as an example for adults who were desiring to enter the kingdom of heaven. How ironic that the lowest subjects in a society would be honored with such respect, and even by Jesus Himself! I thoroughly enjoy studying about the way that Christ overturned the traditional views of the day and totally blew the minds of his listeners. I can only imagine the confusion of the disciples as Jesus used a little kid in their midst as a description of who is the most important in heaven, or the anger of the Pharisees at Jesus' words about the futility of their religious prayers. Jesus blessed the children in Mark 10 not because of anything they had done; not because they knew the Law or because they fasted and offered sacrifices, but because of their simple hearts. What an example for us! We cannot enter the kingdom of heaven without the simple faith that is pure and not complex in nature. The elements that come so naturally to us, adults, such as worry and attachment to possessions, are unnatural for little kids. It is a challenge to live out this sermon that Jesus preached, but perhaps it is because we lack the characteristic of dependence that comes so easy to children. In a culture that honors individuality and independence, it is so difficult to humble ourselves to become like weak, dependent children, but it is with our Heavenly Father's help that it can become possible.

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