

The Greatest In the Kingdom Hints of Heaven, VIII

Matthew 18: 1 – 5

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child, whom he placed among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes a humble place—becoming like this child—is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Jesus must have had a special place in his heart for children. There aren't too many of the teachings of Jesus that have found their way into three of our four Gospels, but this account – of Jesus using a child as an example of how we *all* enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and the even more familiar story of Jesus welcoming children when the disciples were trying to 'shoo' them away, both of these are found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels. Six similar stories.

I conclude from that, that this was such a transparent characteristic of Jesus – his love for children – that it became part of the core story, one of those things that everyone remembered when they pooled their memories of their time with him.

We've all likely seen depictions by various artists of a scene with Jesus and children. And blessed are those folk anywhere who have the privilege of an understanding of Christ's love and acceptance that allows them to picture *themselves* as a child of God, sitting on his knee, his strong arms hugging *us*, holding us, the playful yet tender look of joy that just comes naturally to a parent gazing at their child. What a blessing for those who know that this is exactly the way that we are all invited into God's presence! Amen?

That's really the point of this passage, isn't it?

There is an interesting context for this passage as well. As I mentioned, this account is found in all three of the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). In all three, the immediate *context* is also very similar. There is a general sequence of events: the Transfiguration of Jesus, the healing of a demon possessed boy, Jesus predicting his death, and then this illustration of a child and 'greatness' in the Kingdom is.

Mark and Luke add a little more to this context: after Jesus predicted his death, they tell us that the disciples began to argue as they were walking, over who was the greatest. And Jesus called them on this: 'What was it that you were arguing about back there on the road?'

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But, of course, they were too embarrassed to say. But Jesus knew anyway.

It is interesting to speculate a bit on what may have led up to this argument. Co-incidentally, (if there is such a thing!) *today* in the Christian Calendar happens to be Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday in Epiphany. So churches around the world are looking at the story of the Transfiguration today – which is when Jesus, on a mountain, ‘revealed his glory’ as the second member of the Trinity. Moses and Elijah appeared with him on this mountain, but Jesus becomes bathed in brilliance, “white as the light”, so that the disciples who were with him could no longer look at him, and a voice from heaven called out,

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

So after this moment, if there had been any question before it, these disciples of Jesus knew that the stakes had been raised, that this was no *mere* man that they were following.

So, they’re trying to get their heads around that, coming down from the mountain, and they run into a man who starts begging Jesus to heal his son, who is possessed by a spirit. Listen to this father’s words:

“Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.”

Did you catch that last line? *I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.*” Now, its not *exactly* clear who the ‘they’ were, but the most literal reading here would be that ‘they’ were the disciples who were *not* on the Mountain of Transfiguration with Jesus. I.e., everybody but Peter, James, and John. It was the ‘other nine’.

So, this inner group gets to go with Jesus, and they see this incredible thing that they would just love to share (brag about?) but they were told not to tell anyone about it until after Jesus rose from the dead.¹ So, they can’t say anything. But they have to have felt, kind of, privileged...

¹ Matthew 17:9

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And then this guy comes along and points out the failure of the ‘other’ disciples to do something that they all thought they could/ should have been able to do. (I brought him to your disciples but they could not heal him!) See any potential problems brewing there?

Then Jesus lays on them - again - his prediction of his death. And it says, ‘*the disciples were filled with grief*’ at this news. And the next thing you know – they are arguing over who is the greatest in their little group. Just look at the dynamics going on here: there are some tensions within the group – finger pointing, perceived privileges of a small group, dealing with failure, and high emotions (grief, fear) to boot.

Maybe they’re thinking about what is going to happen when Jesus is no longer around; maybe they are simply comparing themselves to the others – (who’s the better disciple? Who loves him best?) We don’t know. But In the midst of all this Matthew says that they came to Jesus and asked him, “*Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*”

I read that with an emphasis on the word ‘is’; like, “So, who then *is* the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Because the question is assuming that there is an answer – *an* answer. One person. They expected to hear, “Well, Peter, it’s *you*, bro!” (Good luck with that by the way!) Or, maybe, “Of course, that would be Moses... or, Elijah, or _____” someone yet to come.

But instead of naming a person, Jesus... well let’s read it again:

[Jesus] *called a little child, whom he placed among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes a humble place—becoming like this child—is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*

In the larger context here, what does it mean to “*change and become like little children*”? This is, obviously, symbolic; it’s no more literal than when Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be ‘born again’, referring to a new spiritual beginning in the midst of our current lives. In fact, this may be a very similar statement when you think about it.

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But *what* part of child-likeness is Jesus referring to? Because, (can I be honest here?) there are some aspects of little children that I think sometimes in the church we are already *too* much like. Like that old joke where someone says, “I slept like a baby last night... up every two hours and crying for my mother!”

There are some not –so- wonderful characteristics of children that I don’t think Jesus is referring to at all. I seriously don’t think Jesus means to say that “Unless you become completely self-centered, spiteful, and stinky, you will not enter the Kingdom.” I could be wrong...but.

The Scriptures themselves – especially in the New Testament – at times use children as illustrations of what we are *not* to be. Did you ever think of that?

Consider this, **1 Corinthians 3: 1 - 3**

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere human beings?

So Paul here is saying, “Stop acting like children – grow up!”

There’s a similar passage in **Hebrews 5:11-13**

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

So back to Jesus’ illustration... there is *something* about a child, something in a child, that demonstrates to us the proper attitude that we not only need to enter the Kingdom of God, but it is the attitude, the ‘posture’ that when maintained, even makes one ‘Great’ in that Kingdom. And it’s not something that we need to try and figure out, he tells us clearly what it is: *Therefore, whoever takes a humble place—becoming like this child—is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

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The greatest in the kingdom of Heaven are *the humble*. So, what does humble mean? What does it look like to ‘take a humble place’? And how does a child illustrate that to us? I read an article in a theological journal on humility this week and it was great, but we’d need to read it three times (like I did) to get the point as well as a dictionary. So, instead of wading through that I summarized it a bit, added my own thoughts and came up with this: now, this is a list that came out of my own head, and like anything in that category, is subject to your revisions, corrections, and additions. But it’s a starting place to think about this ...

What are some characteristics of humility? The first thing I think of as humility relates to children is **Powerlessness**.

Children have no inherent power. They have great *value*, but no power. There is a movie out that is getting a lot of attention, and raves: “Slumdog Millionaire”. It is ultimately a movie about redemption and sacrifice, and I can understand how people find it uplifting – if they make it to the end. Dianna and I however, didn’t make it to the end, because the abuse of children depicted in it, the extreme poverty, the dehumanization of children due to poverty that we were watching was all too real and, caused a physical reaction within us. We had to leave.

It’s clear in that film though, that children have no power. Children of the Kingdom of Heaven understand that powerlessness in many ways extends to adulthood as well. We are powerless before God. We have nothing to bring that can earn us a place in the kingdom. We are powerless, and poor, standing constantly in need of grace. But children of the Kingdom also understand that it is *in* our very weakness that God’s strength and mercy is made perfect.

Able to be taught

I love to teach. And while, frankly, my favorite stage of life for my kids is right now, I love them as young adults, if there is anything I miss, it is having them come and ask me to explain something or other. I miss the day when I was ‘smart’. (Now, they’re telling me!) I remember that Brian’s questions were often particularly brutal. He would ask, “Why does this happen?”, or, “How does this work?” and I’d often begin by realizing that this is rather complex, so I’d say,

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“well, it’s like....” And he would interrupt me, and say, “No, not what is it *like*, what is it?” I learned the value of saying “I don’t know” through fielding questions from my children.

A child of God never loses that humility. A child of God is a person who can always be taught. Partially because they see the truth of #1, but also because they are humbly listeners, ready to learn some new thing.

Able to Trust

Children are able to trust. And this is what makes the horror of child abuse so heinous. A child’s basic nature is to trust. To trust authority, to trust in a caregiver’s basic goodness, and their fidelity to them. Trust in the consistency of their parents.

One of the issues addressed in the book the Shack that makes it so powerful – now selling over 6 million copies – is that the main character (who, as I recently discovered, represents an 8 year healing process in the author’s life) has to deal with lots of issues including estrangement from his father. There are a lot of people who can relate to that, apparently, and many people with parental issues find that trusting God is very difficult.

But a child trusts... a child of God trusts in the goodness of our heavenly father. And we are not disappointed.

Able to be awed

Anyone who has told lame jokes and made a child laugh, or performed simple magic tricks, or feats of great strength (lifting their mother high in the air... yes I could do that at one point). NO! She weighs the same, it’s me that has changed! Children can be awed. They haven’t learned to be cynical, or critical, or pessimistic. That’s all learned. I think that a child of the kingdom of heaven keeps – or finds again – their capacity to be awed.

Able to be honest – There used to be a show called Children Say the Darndest Things, and a lot of those things that children said proved embarrassing to their parents. But you know, kids tend to say what they think. They let you know how they feel – no matter what, or where, or when.

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Anyone who has watched a temper tantrum in a grocery store knows what I'm talking about. It's even worse when it's a child. And when they're yours...

A humble child of God, though, knows that we can go to God expressing what we're really feeling, not having to pretend or put on masks or airs. This is a 'come are you are' relationship. Tears, anger, joy – kids are blunt, sometimes brutally honest, because they don't know any better. They haven't learned that most people don't want that kind of honesty from someone else. But God does. Children of the Kingdom are honest with God, with each other. No masks.

Children are Able to Love (love without Guile) –

I am always blessed when a little child will come and give me a hug, or holds my hand while they're walking somewhere. That combination of trust and a willingness to show affection is a real gift! Not needing to hide or cover up - things we find so hard to do sometimes as adults.

A child of God is – at least – *learning* to love without guile, pretense, or holding back. Not just to give love, but to receive it. Learning to love God, others, and *themselves* as well.

The last one on my list is that a child of God is

Able to Serve – without expecting rewards.

We saw a very realistic example of this in our drama tonight/this morning. In Humility we realize - like Cookie - that no one gets anyplace good without help, without a hand from someone else at some point. And when we finally realize that we are such debtors to the grace of God, children of the Kingdom are able to serve - and find real joy – in serving others. Without expecting rewards or accolades. Just from the joy of being like Jesus.

Well, that's my list. These are the characteristics of the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. I wonder what you would add?