

Let the little children come

Rev. John Belden

Here's a question someone must be dying to ask (or at least someone should be). If children have sinful natures, why did Jesus say we must become like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven? That's a good question. I'm glad you asked.

Obviously Jesus was commending something about children. The question is, what exactly was He commending? For example, was He commending innocence? There is a sense in which very young children can be called innocent in respect to actual sins. If Jesus was commending innocence, then we must become innocent to enter the kingdom. But none of us can claim innocence. Every one of us is already guilty.

Most children express anger when they don't get their way. Was Jesus saying we must get angry in order to enter the kingdom? Or take the way children can be unreasonable. Is this the behavior we need to imitate? What about a child's natural ignorance? Was Jesus saying we need to become ignorant to enter heaven? Proverbs 22:15 says, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child." Maybe we need to become foolish.

I hope you see the point. Jesus wasn't necessarily commending everything about children when He said we needed to become like them. He certainly wasn't saying we need to become childish. Paul said that he "put away childish things" (I Cor. 13:11). What then was Jesus commending?

There are two main childlike characteristics that Jesus had in mind. The first was humility. In Matthew 18:1-5, Jesus set a little child before His disciples and said, "unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." But notice what particular characteristic Jesus was referring to: "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (v.4).

Jesus wasn't saying that particular child was uncommonly humble. He was referring to the humble state of all children by virtue of their dependency on others. Of all people in society, children are in the most humbled condition. They are forced to trust others for all they need. They cannot provide for

themselves, protect themselves, nor be independent. The point is you must have the same humble, trusting attitude to be saved.

The second trait is similar. In Luke 18:16, Jesus rebuked His disciples saying, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God." What characteristic was Jesus commending in this case?

Notice He referred to the way we are to receive the kingdom. "Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." The clue is in the "little children." In verse 15, Luke says "they also brought infants to Him that He might touch them." The characteristic here is absolute helplessness.

Picture an infant resting in Christ's arms and you have a picture of the way you are to receive the kingdom. Salvation takes place when a sinner rests his full weight by faith on the work of Christ. An infant resting in the arms of its mother contributes nothing to being held up. Christ calls all people to do the same. Rest in His arms and contribute nothing.

If you want to see what it looks like for an adult, just glance up at the previous passage in Luke 18:9-14. The only one "justified" is the tax collector who casts himself completely on the mercy of God. The Pharisee, who trusted in himself, was not justified.

This does not mean that Christianity is a life of inactivity. Christian living involves striving and fighting. But it does mean that entrance into complete salvation is a call to inactivity. Paul said that the one "who does not work but believes" (Rom. 4:5) will be justified.

Far from disproving the point that children have sinful natures, Jesus shows that even they need to come to Him for salvation. It also shows us the importance of parents bringing their children to Christ early. But that's a topic for another article.

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