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Lessons from Children

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:1-6).

Jesus' disciples did not ask the question, "Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" from a purely academic concern. They were all personally interested, hoping to be great in the soon-coming kingdom. It was obvious to them that they had a winning candidate in Jesus, and they believed it wouldn't be long before He would be ruling the world. Opportunity was knocking for those with ambition!

James and John once went so far as to ask Jesus directly if they could sit at His right and left hand in His kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). Matthew tells us that the other ten disciples resented James and John for their request---I suspect because each was secretly hoping to snag a prime position for himself (see Matt. 20:24). We also know, according to Luke, that the twelve once argued among themselves over which of them was the greatest (see Luke 9:46). It seems that Jesus' church has never lacked for leaders who are vying for greatness!

Let's put it into perspective. The desire to be great is the desire to be exalted above others, which is fundamentally a wrong desire. It is born of pure selfishness.

Those who desire to be great naturally work toward that goal by exalting themselves. Those who do it subtly often succeed. Then they die and stand before the One who promised, "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall

be exalted" (Matt. 23:11-12).

Hoping to cure the twelve of their selfish ambition long before judgment day, Jesus responded to their question with an object lesson. He called a child to Himself and set him before them. Then, for the benefit of adults, He made three very remarkable statements about children. If we open our hearts, Jesus' three statements can profoundly impact our lives.

Statement Number One

1.) Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus was not evading their original question. Anyone who hopes to become *great* in heaven must first qualify to *enter* heaven. So Jesus first focused on that, using the child as an example. And because that child would shortly serve as a good example of one who was *great* in the kingdom of heaven, he would naturally serve as a good example of one who would *enter* heaven. It would seem odd if that were not so.

Incidentally, it is from scriptures such as these that we derive the conviction that all children who die go to heaven. If children serve as God's example of heaven-bound people, then it stands to reason that all of them are heaven-bound. They must all eventually reach an age, however, when they too must "be converted and become like children" if they are to enter heaven. Obviously that would be when they are no longer children, but adults, the time that theologians refer to as "the age of accountability." In Jewish tradition (dating back to medieval times), that age is twelve for girls and thirteen for boys. Boys become "Bar Mitzvah" and girls become "Bat Mitzvah," which translated means, "One to whom the commandments apply." According to Jewish thinking, from then on God will hold them responsible for their actions.

But let's get back to what Jesus said: To enter heaven, we must be converted and become like children. Jesus obviously did not mean that we must act as though God is not holding us responsible for our actions. That would require *God* to be converted, and Jesus said that it is *we* who must be converted!

Clearly, we cannot and should not become like children in *every* respect in order to enter heaven. Paul wrote of "doing away with childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11) and Scripture tells us that "foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child" (Prov. 22:15). But what qualities do children possess that are essential for those who want to enter heaven?

Children are usually considered to be pure-hearted, and it is the pure in heart who will see God (see Matt. 5:8). Children are trusting, and we become children of God when we believe in Jesus (see John 1:12). Children are humble, and "the humble shall inherit the earth" (Psalm 37:11; Matt. 5:5).

That third possibility would be my first choice of what Jesus' was speaking about, because in His second statement (which we will soon consider), He seemed to indicate that the same child-like quality that gains one entrance into heaven also makes one great there, and He specifically spoke of humility.

Certainly humility is necessary for salvation, as one must acknowledge his corruption and need, something that proud people just will not do. Remember that in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, one was proud and one was humble. The humble one was justified in God's eyes, while the proud one was not. Jesus summarized that parable about salvation with this lesson: "Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:14). Salvation is predicated upon humility. And so is greatness in God's kingdom.

One other possibility is that Jesus was simply emphasizing that in order to be saved, adults must repent ("be converted," as He said), and when they do, they automatically become like children in the sense that God is not holding their sins against them. Like children, converted adults are innocent in God's eyes. If that is the correct interpretation, then "becoming like children" means "becoming like children in God's eyes," rather than possessing certain child-like traits.

Statement Number Two

2.) Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

When teaching from this particular passage of Scripture, I have sometimes followed Jesus' example and called a child from the crowd, standing him in front of everyone. Without fail, the children always display a degree of timidity. They don't enjoy standing up in front of everyone or being the center of attention. They are void of pride. Compare that with the religious leaders of Jesus' day who loved their seats of honor, respectful greetings, and honorable titles (Matt. 23:6-7). Their modern counterparts also love to be up in front of everyone. Most of us have probably watched spiritual superstars bounding up to church platforms with broad smiles, basking in the applause that follows their grand introductions.

Since God is ruler over heaven, He alone determines who is great there. And to Him, greatness is found in humility.

Humility is lived out in service---in imitation of Christ, the one who is "gentle and *humble* of heart" (Matt. 11:29). He commanded His first leaders to wash each other's feet. But He first washed their feet as an example, demonstrating His own humility by servitude. He also told them, "The greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 23:11).

There is little doubt that within the context of the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, children were generally very obedient to their parents. So an average child served as an especially good example of a humble servant who desired, more than anything else, to please his father. That is also the highest aspiration of every sincere adult follower of Jesus.

Statement Number Three

3.) And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Jesus' third statement is, to me, the most astonishing of the three. After designating children as objects of imitation for adults who desire salvation and greatness in heaven, Jesus then lifts children even higher---identifying them with Himself, to a degree that we would have never believed had He not said it: "*Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me.*" According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus said even more, going one step further:

Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; *and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me* (Mark 9:37, emphasis added).

Most of us can accept the equation: Receiving Jesus = Receiving God the Father. Jesus and the Father are one (see John 10:30). But how difficult it is to accept this equation: Receiving a child in Jesus' name = Receiving Jesus = Receiving the Father! The reason is because receiving Jesus and/or the Father is the means of salvation!

The key to understanding this amazing equation is found in the words, "in My name," that is, "as My representative, acting on My behalf." Those who understand that children are all citizens of God's kingdom (as Jesus said, "To such as these belong the kingdom of heaven"---Matt. 19:14), who know that children's humility makes them great in God's eyes, and who realize how precious they are in God's sight (as Jesus said, their angels are constantly before God's throne---Matt. 18:10), love them dearly for all those reasons. Simply put, if one loves God, he also loves children. The kind of love of which I'm speaking is much more than the sentimental emotion that people of the world sometimes possess for cute children (whom they often abort or abuse). *It is deeply spiritual, connected within the circle of love shared by all of God's family.* Children are part of us! They are "our kind of people!"

This spiritual love for children is the same as the love that all true Christians have for each other, which is what marks them as being authentic members of God's family (see John 13:35; 1 John 3:14). If you don't love followers of Christ, you don't love Christ, and you don't love the Father either. Which is why Jesus said something quite similar about adult believers as He did children:

He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me (Mark 10:40).

So we see Christ incarnated in His people to this amazing degree, so much so that to love Jesus' family members is to love Him, and thus to hate His family is to hate Him. Therefore one's love or lack of love for followers of Christ marks one as saved or unsaved, heaven-bound or hell-bound. *And Christ said the same thing regarding children. Our love or lack of love for them reveals our spiritual condition and eternal destiny.* Notice again Jesus' stern warning that we've already read in our primary text:

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Although in this final statement Jesus specifically speaks of little children who believe in

Him, one would be hard pressed to prove that Jesus was referring only to children who believed in Him in all the other passages when He spoke specifically about children (see Matt. 10:42; 18:1-4, 10, 14; 19:13-14; Mark 9:36-37, 42; 10:13-15; Luke 9:46-48; 17:1-2; 18:16-17). Regardless, we clearly see Jesus' contrast between receiving a child in His name (which would quite possibly result in the child becoming a believer in Jesus) and causing a believing child to stumble. The former helps to open the heart of a child, indicative of that person's faith in Christ, while the latter closes the heart of a child, indicative that he is doomed to hell. Being tied to a millstone and tossed into the ocean is a precursor of what lies beyond death for such a person. When he quickly descends past the depth of 3,280 feet---where surface light no longer penetrates---the pressure of the water is 1,474 pounds per square inch. Not a pleasant experience.

Causing a believing child to "stumble" is obviously a serious offense in God's eyes. True believers would never be guilty of such a crime. But unbelievers and hypocrites are guilty of it all the time, as they set sinful examples before children and sow Satan's lies in their little minds. How tragic it is when, through their words or deeds, *parents* are the very ones who cause their children to stumble into sin. Parents who are letting the TV raise their children are certainly in this category, even if they are professing Christians.

The purpose of this e-teaching? To provide one more spiritual test whereby we can ascertain our true spiritual condition. If you have a deep spiritual love for children *that is lived out in words and deeds*, that should fill you with assurance that you have a genuine relationship with Jesus and His Father. If you don't possess such a spiritual love for children, or if by your words and deeds you are causing children to stumble, you need to be "converted and become like children," opening the door for God's transforming grace to work in your life.

But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant and said to Him, "Do You hear what these children are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for Yourself?'" (Matt. 21:15-16).