

Maintaining A Child Like Sense of Wonders (Become Like A Little Child)

Matthew 18:3

Emmanuel Adeoye (Evangelist)

Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (**Matt 18:3**). Jesus is not talking about children but *little* children meaning infants or toddlers. What did he mean when he said we must become like an infant to enter the kingdom? According to some, little children are special because

- a. They are without worldly ambition
- b. They don’t count (they were considered losers in early society)
- c. They are honest and without guile
- d. They are capable of receiving love
- e. They are humble

These are fine interpretations, but again they fall short of Christ’s meaning.

WHAT’S SPECIAL ABOUT LITTLE CHILDREN?

People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

- And **he took the children in his arms**, placed his hands on them and blessed them. (**Mark 10:13-16**) What makes little children special is they are helpless.
- The kids in this story didn’t come to Jesus; they were *brought* to Jesus.
- Most of them couldn’t walk, so they had to be carried.
- Some couldn’t stand, so Jesus had to hold them, and he was delighted to do so.
- People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them... (**Luke 18:15**)
- In Luke’s account of the story the little children were babies and Jesus says the same thing. “Unless you change and become as helpless as a babe, you’ll never enter the kingdom” (my paraphrase of Luke 18:17).

- This isn't about your baby-like faith or your infant-like humility. It's not about you at all but Jesus whose desire is to help the helpless And you are totally helpless when it comes to living the life that God wants for you.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

- The problem is that many of us are *not* helpless. We've swallowed a self help gospel that says "Do A, B, and C and you'll be blessed."
- We're like the rich man in the parable who backed himself, when we should be like Lazarus whom God helped. "God helps those who help themselves." That's not true. God helps the helpless. He surely wants to help everyone but only the helpless receive his help.
- Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (**Matt 18:4**)
- The apostle Paul said, "*I take pleasure in infirmities... for when I am weak, then I am strong*" (**2 Cor 12:10**).
- I have never heard anyone say, "*I take pleasure in infirmities,*" yet Paul did. He wasn't saying sickness is a good thing or a secret blessing, because it's not. But when we're down, the Lord can take us up.
- In this world success comes as a result of hard work, perseverance and staying healthy. But that sort of success can only take you so far.
- Real success, the kind that endures into eternity, follows a different route.
- What's the path to greatness in the kingdom? It's the one taken by the little child, the weak, and the lowly.
- Out of the mouths of babes and infants
- Okay, so you've been helpless and cried out to God and he's taken you in and now you're in the kingdom. You've changed from the helpless to the helped.
- Now what?
- Stay in that place of total dependence. Don't ever change. Do nothing for yourself.
- Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (**Matt 18:4**)
- The problem is we're too strong, too talented, too capable, too grown-up. We pray, "God help me," but our actions say, "*Don't worry Lord, I've got this.*"

It is these words found in Matthew 18:3—and similar words found in other places Scripture—that lead us to believe that children who die enter the kingdom of heaven (see, for example, **2 Sam. 12:23; Matt. 18:10; 19:14**). If we must become like children in order to enter heaven (**Matt. 18:3**), and if the kingdom of heaven belongs to children (**Matt. 19:14**), it stands to reason that any and all children who die enter heaven.

- It is also from Jesus' words in **Matthew 18:3** that we deduce that there must be a time when children reach an age when God no longer considers them to be children, but rather to be adults, at which time they must—if they hope to enter heaven—be converted and become, in some way, like the children

whom they previously were. Theologians refer to that age of passage from childhood to adulthood as the “*age of accountability*,” a phrase that acknowledges the fact that children are sinful, but that they are not held accountable for their sin by God until they reach adulthood.

- Scripture does not reveal an exact age when that transition takes place, and it seems reasonable to think that it could be different for every child.
- In any case, a most important question we should all ask ourselves is this: *Have I been genuinely converted?* Tragically, multitudes of people around the world who identify on some level as being Christians have never experienced *authentic* Christian conversion.
- Authentic conversion is so dramatic that Scripture describes it as a resurrection. Unconverted people are characterized in the Bible as being dead. When they are converted, however, they become alive. That is one reason converted people are expected to immediately be baptized.
- When done biblically, baptism is done by total immersion, representing the new convert’s death, burial and resurrection. That is a picture of authentic Christian conversion. So every professing Christian should ask himself or herself: *Have I been resurrected? Or am I just religious?*

THE RELIGIOUS CHAIN

- Although it is right and proper to spiritually train our children, there is an inherent danger in it: Our children might carry on our spiritual practices and traditions but never actually be converted. And their children and grandchildren might follow the same path, creating a chain of religious, but unconverted, descendants.
- The human links in such chains never experience conversion simply because they don’t see their need to convert. They are convinced that their veneer of Christianity is proof they are Christians. They have some knowledge of the Bible, but Jesus is not their Lord, which explains why they ignore His core commandments, like His commandment to (1) make disciples of all the nations or to (2) love their neighbors as themselves.
- Regarding Jesus’ commandment to make *disciples* (that is, obedient followers) of all the nations, religious people never attempt to make disciples, near them or abroad, because they are not themselves His disciples.
- Regarding Jesus’ commandment to love their neighbors as themselves, religious people do, of course, love those who love them, but that is something Jesus said even tax collectors and Gentiles do (***Matt. 5:46-47***). The love of unconverted people extends no further than their own family, friends and religious group. They could care less about the multitudes in their town and around the world who are on the road to hell (which they imagine they are not on themselves).
- Any practice or tradition among their religious group that would usurp Christ’s rightful place or obscure or pervert His clear teaching would result in a holy uproar within their hearts that would manifest itself in concern, grief and action.

- Any “loss” suffered as a result of conversion, whether it be financial, friends or even family, would be counted as being of no comparison to what has been gained. As the apostle Paul, who before his *conversion* was a very zealous religious person with a very religious pedigree, wrote:
- If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the Church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead (***Phil. 3:5-11***).

These words are not only the testimony of a former Pharisee whom most everyone would have assumed was on the road to heaven even before his dramatic conversion (most everyone except God, that is), but the testimony of everyone who has been genuinely converted and who truly believes in Jesus Christ. They have found the “treasure in the field” that is worth giving up everything to gain (see ***Matt. 13:34***). Christ has become their life (***Phil. 1:21***). Nothing compares to Him.

MAN-PLEASER OR GOD-PLEASER?

If the true convert is forced to decide between pleasing family or Christ, he chooses Christ. This is what Jesus undeniably taught:

- Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household.
- He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me (***Matt. 10:34-37***).
- If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple (***Luke 14:26***).
- Regardless of how much we might soften the hyperbole in these passages, Jesus’ message remains crystal clear. True converts/believers/disciples love Jesus supremely, and they desire to please Him above all others.
- *And this is basic Christianity.* An authentic conversion is not a socially imposed conformity founded in the fear of man, but a change of belief and behavior that is rooted in the fear and love of God.

- Of whom do I write? I suspect some readers will be silently saying “Amen” as they think of certain groups, churches and denominations. The truth, however, is that you can probably pick any group, church or denomination under the banner of Christendom. Every one of them includes men-pleasing, tradition- and heritage-lovers who think they are Christians but who have actually never been converted.
- In many groups, those kinds of folks are the large majority. Generally speaking, the longer a group has been established, the larger the percentage of its members resemble unconverted Pharisees—religious but not resurrected. If you talk to them about Jesus, they will be uncomfortable and resistant.

IN WHAT WAY MUST WE BECOME LIKE CHILDREN?

- A sure sign that one has been converted, according to Jesus, is that the convert becomes like a child.
- Jesus did not specify precisely in what way we must become like children if we hope to enter heaven, but it seems doubtful that He was referring to any of the negative characteristics associated with children. We all know, for example, that children can be very selfish, and they must be trained for years to become considerate of others.
- In light of everything else that Jesus taught, it would seem safe to conclude He was not saying selfishness is what marks true converts who will one day enter heaven!
- Considering the positive characteristics of children, some point out that children are generally more trusting than adults. Thus, some associate Jesus’ words about our need to become like children with the truth that salvation is possessed by faith (Eph. 2:8). We need to have faith like children, they say, trusting in Jesus in order to enter heaven.
- Others note that children understand their dependency, particularly upon their parents. In fact, one characteristic that differentiates children from adults is dependency and independency.

So, some say we must, like children, have no thought of independence or self-sufficiency, and we must acknowledge that apart from Christ—who atoned for our sins, forgave us, and is empowering us to obey God—we have no hope of salvation. Others emphasize the fact that children naturally love and respect their parents and generally tend to obey them. So, they say we must similarly obey God. And still others point out that children are usually considered to be innocent. No one looks at a little child and wonders if she is hiding a “*deep, dark past.*”

Although such innocence is lost to adults, it can be regained through the forgiveness and transformation offered by God through Jesus Christ. So, some claim that children’s innocence is what Jesus had in mind when He said we must become like children to enter heaven.

- I think there is truth to all of those views. Yet I think they should be incorporated into a larger view that not only takes what Jesus said at face value, but also considers the context of the entire New Testament. Jesus did not specify any single characteristic of children that we should imitate. Rather, He said we must be *converted* and *become like children*.
- Is it possible that children—to whom, according to Jesus, the kingdom of heaven belongs—possess a spiritual nature that is lost to adults, but that adults can regain by experiencing an authentic, spiritual conversion? Is it possible that babies and children are in some sense “spiritually alive,” but they “spiritually die” when they chose the wrong path upon reaching the “age of accountability,” after which time they must be “spiritually reborn” to become, once again, “spiritually alive” if they hope to enter heaven?
- Personally, I am persuaded that this could very well be what Jesus had in mind when He said we must “become like children” to enter the kingdom of heaven.
- Although it seems indisputable that babies are born with—and all children possess—a sinful nature, I am not so certain that such traits preclude the idea that babies and children are “spiritually alive.” According to the Bible, all authentic Christians are “spiritually alive,” yet Scripture also states that all of them still possess sinful natures, what Paul refers to as “the flesh” that “sets its desire against the Spirit” (see **Gal. 5:17**). So, if spiritually alive adults can simultaneously possess sinful natures, why should anyone claim that children, because they have sinful natures, can’t be spiritually alive?

PAUL: ALIVE, DEAD, ALIVE AGAIN

- An interesting verse in Paul’s letter to the Romans seems to support this understanding:
- I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me (**Rom. 7:9-11**).
- Although Paul’s words may not be as clear as we’d wish, it is obvious that he was not referring to being *physically* alive or dead. He could only have been referring to being *spiritually* alive and dead. Scripture teaches that all human beings are tri-part in nature: spirit, soul and body (**2 Thes. 5:23; Jas. 2:16**).
- Note that in the above passage, Paul referred to a time when he once was alive, but that he died “*when the commandment came*.” The Law of Moses, of course, had been given by God hundreds of years before Paul was born, so when Paul referred to the time when “the commandment came,” it seems reasonable to think he was speaking of the time when he heard God’s commandment, was held accountable by God to obey it, but decided to disobey it, at which point he died, spiritually. All of this leads me to think Paul believed there was a time in his life, prior to his conversion, when he was spiritually alive...

- But, when he reached an age of accountability, he sinned, and he became spiritually dead. And all of that seems to support the idea that babies and children are not spiritually dead, but rather, are spiritually alive, which is perhaps *the* reason or yet another reason Jesus said that we must become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven
- In addition to all of this, the New Testament repeatedly tells us that truly converted people actually become “*children of God*”: See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are.... Beloved, now we are children of God (**1 John 3:1a, 2a; see also John 1:12; Rom. 8:14, 16; Gal. 3:26; Phil 2:15; 1 John 3:1-2**).

EVEN MORE “LIKE CHILDREN”

- Other New Testament scriptures reveal that true believers in Christ are not only “adopted” by God into His family—which by itself might lead them to think they are only very fortunate orphans—but that they are actually also “born of God” (**1 John 5:1**). That makes them God’s *actual* children. They are “born of His Spirit” (**John 3:6**) and indwelt by His Spirit (**1 Cor. 6:19**). So they possess His nature. If they could take a “spiritual DNA test,” it would reveal “*divine spiritual genetics*”!
- As Paul wrote, “Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, *children of God* above reproach, and “*be imitators of God, as beloved children*; (**Phil. 2:15; Eph. 5:1**; emphasis added). Or, as John wrote, “No one who is born of God *practices* sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (**1 John 3:9**, emphasis added).
- *This, too, is basic Christianity*. This is what it means to be a “new creation in Christ,” in which “the old things passed away” and “*new things have come* (**1 Cor. 5:17**). This is what it actually means to be “born again,” another prerequisite Jesus mentioned to entering heaven (**John 3:3; see also 1 Pet. 1:3, 23**). To enter heaven, we must be converted and be spiritually reborn to become like children, *children of God*.
- It is interesting to think that the many children with whom we interact throughout our lives serve as divinely-placed examples to us of what we must become to enter heaven. Had God desired, He could have created us to reproduce, not babies, but mature adults. But He designed humans so that we would be surrounded—all of our lives—by children, little teachers whose silent sermons hold the key to eternal life. Let us open our ears and eyes to the divine message they continually broadcast!

IN CONCLUSION,

- Here are the all-important questions each one of us should ask ourselves:
- Have I experienced a conversion, a change of mind and heart that was so dramatic that it can be described as a “resurrection,” and one that has resulted in a relationship with God that supersedes all other relationships, as evidenced by my obedience to Christ’s commandments? Or am I just a link in

a religious chain following some man-made traditions behind a veneer of Christian culture?

- Have I become “like a child” through a spiritual rebirth? Can I point to a time in my life when I was spiritually dead but became spiritually alive? Am I indwelled by God’s Spirit so that I can say with Paul and every authentic Christian since Paul, “*It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*” (**Gal. 2:20**)?