“Like a Child”

People were bringing little children to Jesus so that He might touch them, but the disciples chewed the adults out for doing that! Mark writes, “The disciples spoke *sternly* to them” (Mark 10:13). Jesus didn’t appreciate this attitude at all! “But when Jesus saw this, he was *indignant*” (Mark 10:14). We don’t know why the disciples were so nasty about this – maybe they wanted

to protect Jesus from being bothered by a bunch of kids. Whatever the motive, Jesus didn’t like it. He held children. He blessed them. Matthew says the parents wanted Jesus to pray for their children.

Then Jesus uses this as a teachable moment and says something absolutely remarkable: “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). So, we have to receive the kingdom of God like a child in order to get in!

In a related passage in Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus is asked, “Who’s the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”, Jesus answers again with a reference to children. Jesus says to a child nearby, “Come here a minute.” Using that little child as an example, Jesus says, “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

The word “change” or “turn” is a very strong word. The King James Version has it “unless you are *converted*’. It suggests a complete turnaround, a radical change.

*So we have to become like a child or we won’t get into God’s kingdom.* If Jesus were here in person, and said, “I want to tell you something so important, that unless you do it, you will *never* get into God’s kingdom” – don’t you think we’d perk up and listen! We have to receive the kingdom of God *like a child****,*** or we will never get in!

Let me first just say a word about the kingdom of God – what it is. It’s also called the kingdom of *heaven*. Same thing. The kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, is *the rule or reign of God.* People often say the kingdom of God is *heaven.* That’s true. Because God rules

completely in heaven. God’s will is done 100% in heaven. But in some sense God’s kingdom is present *wherever God rules* in our lives, in our relationships, in the world. Little glimpses of God’s kingdom in these. The kingdom of God broke into the world with the coming of Jesus, but the kingdom of God will only fully come when Jesus returns in glory.

Jesus says we can only be part of this kingdom if we become like a child. But what does it mean to receive God’s kingdom *like a child*? What is it about a child, that we should be like? Of course, it does *not* mean we should be *child****ish****.* That we act like babies! Immature. Irresponsible adults. Juvenile in our behavior.

But here are some characteristics about children that Jesus probably had in mind. *Children are dependent.* Little children depend on their parents, or adults, for their very existence. By the time Nancy and I had our first child I had my bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree. Courses in psychology. I taught children and counseled parents. But all of that didn’t count for much the day we brought that tiny bundle of flesh home from the hospital. I remember being afraid to hold the baby, feeling an overwhelming sense of anxiety – maybe even panic – as I realized that this 3-4 day old little critter was totally dependent on Nancy and me (neither of whom knew much at all about what to do and how to do it)! Little infants are totally dependent on us. Left alone for very long they will die.

Someone has reminded us that animals have babies and minutes later they’re walking! It takes a human baby 5 months just to get where she can turn over! And mom and dad get all excited: “She rolled over! It only took a half a year!” And it takes years – sometimes *many years* – for a child to be totally independent from mom or dad.

If we’re to get into the kingdom of God, we have to realize our dependence on God. A lot of people think that depending on God is a sign of weakness. Religion is for weaklings, those who don’t have enough on the ball to make it on their own. But our basic sin as human beings is this matter of trying to run our own life without God. Going it on our own. Piloting our own ship. That was Adam and Eve’s sin.

Our heavenly Father is the Source of our very being: Every breath is a gift of God. Without Him, we can’t even live.

We’re also totally dependent on Him for salvation and eternal life. A little 2-year-old is totally dependent on adults for food, clothing, shelter. He or she has no money to bring, no skills to contribute, no wisdom to offer. That’s how it is with salvation: There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn the forgiveness of our sins, or a place in heaven. Do we have the power within ourselves to conquer death? All of this is offered us as a gift through Christ, and what Christ has done for us. The kingdom of God is not for the self-sufficient!

In Matthew 18, where Jesus says we must receive the kingdom of heaven like a

child, Jesus goes on to say, “Whoever becomes *humble* like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4). It’s the *humility* of realizing we are dependent on our heavenly Father for life itself, and eternal salvation. We are not all powerful, all knowing. all good – but God is!

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Mark 10:15).

*Then too, I believe Jesus was thinking about our need to trust.* Children possess an amazing ability to have a simple and unquestioning trust. They don’t know where the food comes from – they trust it will be there when it’s time to eat. They’re unaware of the money it takes to live, they just expect that their needs will be provided. They trust their parents to look after them.

They have a simple faith, a simple trust. They don’t clutter it with a bunch of complicated stuff. They just believe. In a sense, total trust is the center of a young child’s existence!

Probably we’ve all seen, or known of, parents who are not very responsible, not very wise, not very good parents, and yet their children still trust those parents to provide for them. Sometimes children’s trust in adults can lead them to a place of danger. Which is why wise parents instruct and warn their children not to go with a stranger, or entrust themselves to an adult they don’t know.

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In order to be part of God’s kingdom, it’s essential that we trust God. We can’t even begin a

relationship with God without a certain amount of trust. It’s when we trust Christ and all He’s done for us to save us, that we begin the Christian life and are saved.

Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” We have to believe God exists. We have to trust that He can and will provide our needs. We have to trust that He loves us and cares about us. We can’t understand everything. We can’t explain everything in life. Can we have that simply, childlike faith to trust in the goodness of God, no matter what?

“Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Mark 10:15). Children are *dependent.* Children *trust.* And then, *children have an openness and receptivity.* Kids by nature are curious! They want to touch and feel and smell and explore this fascinating world! There’s a beautiful, childlike wonder in these little tykes!I like how someone describes it: “Little children are fascinated with the simplest toy. Many times they are more fascinated with the box than with the toy itself. When his mother puts a cloth over his face, pulls it back, and says, ‘Peek-a-boo!” the child squeals with delight. Watch the eager face of a child smell a flower, pet an animal, or sing a song for the first time.”

One morning when I was working on this sermon I glanced out the window to our neighbors across the street. Their little girl (maybe 3 years old) came out of the garage in her bare feet, waiting for her grandma to come out of the garage with the stroller and the new baby. The little 3-year-old twirls around a few times, looks intently at something in the grass. (Imagine an adult waiting – maybe grumbling – “Come on, hurry up!” – not twirling around in a delightful way).

Children see the world with a sense of wonder. They can pick up a dirty old pen and see it as a treasure. They can try to grab a cockroach to see what it’s about.

Of course, we adults have a way of trying to squeeze that sense of wonder out of them! “Oh no, honey! That pen’s dirty. Yukky! You don’t know who touched that!” Aren’t these kids lucky that they’ll soon grow up to be like us!

We adults can become so blasé, so jaded. The world can become so commonplace to us that we lose that sense of awe and wonder about God and His creation. I think becoming like a child in order to enter the kingdom of God means to be open and receptive to the wonder of God’s creation, the wonder of God’s redeeming love for us! Being open to the realm of the spiritual – the deeper things of God and life. Not being so caught up in material things, but hungering and thirsting to know more of God and His ways!

George Beverly Shea wrote a gospel hymn that captures this sense of wonder.

“There’s the wonder of sunset at evening,

The wonder of sunrise I see;

But the wonder of wonders that thrills my soul Is the wonder that God loves me.

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“There’s the wonder of springtime and harvest,

The sky, the stars, the sun;

But the wonder of wonders that thrills my soul

Is a wonder that’s only begun.” Then the chorus:

“O the wonder of it all! The wonder of it all!

Just to think that God loves me.

O the wonder of it all! The wonder of it all!

Just to think that God loves me.”

A French priest and author, Michel Quoist, in his book *Prayers,* has this piece called “I Like Youngsters.” Part of it goes like this:

“God says: I like youngsters. I want people to be like them.

I don’t like old people unless they are still children.

I want only children in my Kingdom; this has been directed

from the beginning of time.

Youngsters – twisted, humped, wrinkled, white-bearded –

all kinds of youngsters, but youngsters.

There is no changing it; it has been decided. There is room for no one else.

I like little children because my image has not yet been dulled in them.

They have not botched my likeness; they are new, pure,

without a blot, without a smear.

So, when I gently lean over them, I recognize myself in them.

I like them because they are still growing, they are still improving.

They are on the road, they are on their way.

But with grown-ups there is nothing to expect any more.

They will no longer grow, no longer improve.

They have come to a full stop.

It is disastrous. Grown-ups think they have arrived.” Then he finishes:

“Alleluia! Alleluia! Open (the door), all of you, little old men!

It is I, your God, the Eternal, risen from the dead coming to

bring back to life the child in you.

Hurry! Now is the time. I am ready to give you again the beautiful face of a child,

the beautiful eyes of a child.

For I love youngsters, and I want everyone to be like them.”

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