



Little Ones to Him Belong

by Dean Merrill

A close friend of mine, a union relations manager with a large corporation, uses a two-week suspension without pay as the last step before firing.

I thought of this recently while reading how Jesus dealt with His disciples in Matthew 18 on the

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subject of their relative prestige in the Kingdom of Heaven.

He found their attitude so objectionable that He confronted them with an ultimatum: "I tell you the truth, *unless you change* . . . you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3, NIV, italics mine).

The question of a promotion was not even on the table; Jesus faced His men with the possibility of exclusion from the premises if they did not reform.

To punctuate how far afield

they were, He called them to imitate the humility of childhood. In fact, He invited a nearby child to join His personnel conference.

Can you visualize the scene? Thirteen muscular, bearded men gathered around one little boy—perhaps a preschooler, at least small enough to be lifted into Jesus' arms, according to Mark's account.

"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven," the

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Master said.

From there He continued into His most extensive teaching on the subject of adult attitudes toward children. Jesus, the adult, the skilled carpenter, revealed Himself as the special friend and protector of children. And He challenged His disciples to be the same.

In our age, adults are becoming ever more blunt about the faults of children.

"America seems to be harboring a new resentment toward children," says a Washington newsletter, "a resentment which is replacing the nation's decade of fascination with youth during the 1960s."

Taxpayers are no longer as willing to subsidize public education. The best of all possible life-styles, according to recent opinion polls, is to be happily married—without kids.

Ann Landers dared ask her readers whether, if they had it to do over, they would bear children. A thumping 70 percent of those responding wrote back: "No!"

Those of us enmeshed in the rush of North American business and professional life rarely show sensitivity to children. Nothing about our jobs demands it. We live and function in a largely adult world, surrounded by other highly educated, highly motivated adults.

In such a world, the competition demands that we be rational, orderly, forceful, and efficient. Children are often non-rational, disorderly, powerless, and redundant.

Note the pace of a metropolitan airport at 7:30 on a business morning. Suited men stride toward flights to New York or Los Angeles, while those booked for shorter, non-breakfast hops stand at coffee-and-roll counters and wolf their morning sustenance.

Freshly printed newspapers wait in the vending machines. Everything is pre-arranged for

adult convenience; everything keeps moving. There's a day's work to be done, and people are getting on with it.

Observe a convention of lawyers or doctors or even ministers. Listen to the vocabulary level. Notice the prevailing protocol and the importance of job titles and academic degrees.

Watch them value performance over feelings. Listen in the corridors and elevators to their put-downs of those, alas, less erudite or progressive.

Surely Christ Jesus understands that we face such pressures. Surely He even approves of our using our intellectual gifts. And yet He insists that we—especially we hard-driving, breadwinning males—not let our culture prevent us from relating to children.

"Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me," He contends.

None of us would knowingly refuse to entertain Him. We would immediately cancel all appointments if, by some miracle, Christ were to come in physical form to our homes. Yet how many of us men—and even some women—hesitate at the prospect of spending more than a few minutes with a child?

Is this good use of our valuable time? Shouldn't we be accomplishing something of longer-range significance?

In our pragmatic, cost-effective world, the child is hard-pressed to prove his worth.

Once, the young were an economic asset. To an American farmer at the turn of this century, the birth of a child (particularly a son) meant a net gain of at least \$5,000 in labor that would otherwise have had to be purchased over the next eighteen years or so. Adults paid more attention to children because they genuinely needed them.

In urban and suburban life, all that has changed.

One Florida State University

professor estimated in 1977 that the decision of whether to have a baby had become a \$64,000 question—the price tag for raising a child from cradle through college. The cost has undoubtedly nearly doubled since then.

It is left to us, the disciples of the twentieth century, to swim upstream. Jesus Christ sees children as not only intrinsically valuable, but also as unique models of Kingdom virtues. Their openness, their eagerness to learn, their lack of pretense, and their pliability are all instructive for hardbitten adults.

Hear the venerable Matthew Henry, respected scholar and busy pastor of a London congregation: "Grown men, and great men, should not disdain the company of little children. They may either speak to them, and give instruction to them; or look upon them, and receive instruction from them."

This is not to say that kids are always angelic. Even the little boy Jesus picked up probably hit his sister or whined at bedtime. But the Lord did not let that distract Him from the fact that kids *do* do some things right.

And whether they're polite or rude, loving or sarcastic, generous or selfish, helpful or exasperating, we cannot ignore them. Jesus forbids it, and we cheat ourselves out of a crucial part of life's richness.

Notice that He didn't assume we would find it natural to be child-oriented. Beginning in verse 6, He spoke about those who would abuse and mistreat the young. Long before we began tabulating our society's growing problem with child beatings and molestation, He said, "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!" (v. 7).

Though we may never have been guilty of physically abusing children, we have verbally abused or ignored them.

Why?

We are too busy.

We have filled our days with generating dollars or generating

praise from other adults. To spend time with children or to do things in their interest, we will have to bump something already scheduled.

We do not understand childhood.

In our eagerness to demonstrate maturity, we have forgotten what kids are like. We need to reacquaint ourselves with what growing up is all about. There are plenty of books to inform us and plenty of real live specimens all around us. The question is whether we will take the time to read, study, observe . . . and remember.

We are not convinced that children are that important.

Yes, theoretically we affirm that they are God's creation, "the leaders of tomorrow," "gifts from above." We assent to all the clichés. But on a practical basis we are not convinced that they really do need us, and we them. That is why the Lord Jesus felt it necessary to say, "See that you not look down on one of these little ones" (v. 10).

We might all view children a little differently if we took His next words seriously: "For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven."

Kids may be small, but they have powerful allies in high places.

This is what moved Canstein, a writer of the previous century, to observe, "What precious treasure have parents in their children, since for their sakes the holy angels and Christ Himself lodge with them!"

This also accounts for the rather shocking penalty the Lord suggested for adults who misguide children. He posed a choice in verse 6: Which is worse—to cause a little one to sin or to be roped to a millstone and heaved into the Mediterranean?

The former wrecks damage on two persons, one an innocent victim; whereas, the second affects only one. Jesus was not trying to be melodramatic; such drownings had actually been ordered by Augustus and, according to St. Jerome, were also practiced by the Romans on

leaders of Judas of Galilee's insurrection.

It is not enough, however, simply to avoid damaging or hindering our children. The Lord calls for more than a policy of benign neglect. He concludes His discussion with His disciples by telling the story of the lost sheep. The same story appears in Luke 15:3-7 with an application to sinners in general. But here in Matthew, He is more specific about just whom the disciples are to actively bring back to the fold:

"In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (v. 14).

Such a change will not be easy for some of us. The traditional privileges and exemptions of the adult male may have to be questioned.

Our attitudes toward our families may have to be adjusted. Even the priorities of our churches may need a second look. Children are not among the heavy givers, but surely that should not dampen their claim on the church's love and attention.

That is why Jesus said, "Unless you change. . . ."

John Charlier Gerson, an eminent churchman, scholar, chancellor of the University of Paris, and the theological leader of the reforming councils of Pisa (1409) and Constance (1415), dealt with all the great questions of his age. But in his later years, he retired to a convent at Lyons where he found his greatest enjoyment in teaching children.

The story is told that in 1429, as he felt the approach of death, he called once more for the children to gather around his bed and pray with him. He did not assume, as we do in our time, that children should be rushed away from the dying.

Let us never forget that God has promised to use the small, the weak, and the uninfluential in special and surprising ways, "so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor. 1:29).

In the final analysis, He calls us His children. □