

CHILDLIKE OR CHILDISH? CARL McMURRAY

One recurring theme that seemed to arise in the conversation of Jesus' disciples was their concern for greatness. We might reason that they were a "beaten down" nation, ruled by pagans, so the idea of respect and self-esteem was an attractive ideal for them. Or, we could excuse them on the basis of a desire for greatness being common to man and a natural proclivity that all of us must work on at one level or another. Whether there is a good reason for their thinking or not, however, Jesus clearly answers their question and points them toward true greatness. His answer is to "become like children" in Matthew 18:1-6 and he breaks it into three areas.

First, he tells them that they must be converted or changed and become like children. They, and we, need to be changed from the unrighteous attitudes and actions of our adulthood to recall the innocent traits of our youth. We need to take to ourselves once more the trusting heart, the forgiving spirit, the joy, and the gentleness that belong to an unspoiled child. A child will leap from the heights into his father's arms because of his trust. How sad that we must become adults who not only must measure the leap, but feel our way down the step and walk in fear of the fall. It is not a physical span that I'm speaking of crossing, but the leap of faith that is based upon our Father's word.

Note that the traits above, and many more of a child that could be named, are traits of childlikeness NOT childishness. An adult that must be pampered and cooed over like a little one because of their childishness is a sad occurrence, as any handicapped person might be. Traits such as jealousy over the toys of another, untaught stubbornness, or temper tantrums when we don't get our way are NOT the activities of childhood that Jesus speaks of. His next comment makes that clear.

He mentions secondly that this change is brought about because one humbles himself like a child. A child is worry free because he knows he is cared for. He is trusting and dependant and quick to cry out or run to his parent because that is where his security lies. It is an unusual child that is so bold and self dependant that they will not fear the dark or strange situation suddenly thrust upon them. The humble heart rests secure in the knowledge that one greater is directing events and will bring all things to a good end. The humble heart doesn't need to challenge, or boast, or envy, or fear because he is content to know his Father is in charge.

And lastly, our Lord speaks from the other side of the coin. He directs His comments away from becoming like a child and more toward how to treat the child. Rather than jockeying for "greatness" positions with each other in the kingdom, the disciples needed to learn care for one another. From time to time we can use the same lesson. Verse 5 seems to indicate that how we receive one of these humble hearted brethren is how we receive the Lord. This lesson is taught in a number of places in the gospels. And to "abuse" one of these trusting ones, to kill their joy, to run roughshod over their gentle spirit, or take advantage of their forgiveness... to do this, Jesus indicates it would be better for us to be dead.

May we be converted and "become like little children." May we examine ourselves and put away childishness in order to become more childlike. Jesus promises that this is the true path to greatness in His kingdom and the best way to deal gently with one another.