

The Kingdom of God and Children

Some years ago, a friend took her daughter, Lucy, to a restaurant in a Jewish neighbourhood. Because of the neighbourhood, most of the people in that restaurant at lunch hour were Jewish, and the place was quite busy. When she was finished eating, this little girl, a very precocious sort, stood up on her seat, turned around and said in a loud voice, "I have something to say to everyone." She attracted the attention of nearly everyone in the restaurant who then heard her proclaim loudly, "Jesus Christ was born King of the Jews." With that she sat down. Her mother didn't know how to respond, for while her daughter had told the truth, it created a very awkward moment. Most of the Jewish people in that restaurant did not believe that Jesus was their King, nor did they recognize them as their Saviour.

We often hear the phrase, "have the faith of a child" or "a childlike faith." What people are often advocating for is a simple faith that is not "clouded" by deep theological teaching. Simply believe and that is enough, they tell us. They want to keep it simple, making straightforward statements like Lucy did. Those who use these phrases point us to Jesus' teaching about children as is recorded for us in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 18:1-3, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-17). "The Bible teaches us that we have to have a childlike (simple) faith," they say. A careful reading of these passages, however, reveals to us that Jesus is not speaking about having faith like that of a child but rather that we be like children when it comes to entering and living within God's Kingdom. For us to fully understand what Jesus means, it is necessary to think about the context given to these discourses.

In Matthew and Mark Jesus' teaching about children and the Kingdom of God takes place in the context of the disciples trying to determine who would be greatest in Jesus' kingdom. It is at that point that Jesus brings a child forward and advises that whoever wants to enter the Kingdom of God must change and be like little children. What makes someone worthy of a position in God's Kingdom? Jesus confronts the idea of meriting or earning a place in the kingdom by presenting to his disciples a little child. Children, in those days, had no rights and privileges, and they knew that everything they had was given to them as a gracious gift.

In Mark's gospel, the context is decidedly different. There Mark gives us a glimpse of ongoing discussions in the Jewish community in which scholars tried to set boundaries for remaining in God's Kingdom. How far can someone push the boundaries before they are no longer living by God's principles and rules? In that context, Jesus confronts the idea that one can do things to become acceptable to God and remain so. Again, using a child as an example, Jesus shows that like children we can do nothing to earn a place in God's Kingdom.

In all three gospels (John does not include this discussion), when Jesus puts a child forward as an example, he is not saying that we should advocate for a simple, straightforward kind of faith that allows for little deeper thought. Rather, he is saying that if we want to be part of God's Kingdom, we must first realize that there is nothing we can do but merely receive what has been offered to us. Essentially what Jesus is

teaching is that, like little children, we accept God's grace, and his gracious act to include us in his Kingdom is not something we earn for ourselves.

A child can understand this, as Lucy did when she announced that Jesus was born King of the Jews. She knew that most of the people in the restaurant were Jewish, and she knew that Jesus came to save them as well. She was simply offering to those around her the same grace God had given to her. She could not have articulated God's grace with greater depth because, after all, she was only three years old.

Children have a simple faith, this is true, but they also have no problem believing that they can do nothing to earn a place in God's Kingdom. They are used to accepting gifts because everything they have has been given to them. What can a three-year old do to earn what they receive? They receive what has been given because they have no other means by which to survive.

As adults, we develop the idea that we have something to offer. In fact, we become less inclined to accept a gift freely given, and we want to find some reason to say that we merited what we received. So, when it comes to entry into God's Kingdom, we like to believe that we have done something to earn a place there. But, like little children, we have done nothing, and we can do nothing.

This is where a deepening understanding of God's Word is helpful. Rather than operating on a child's storybook knowledge of the Bible, as we grow up, we need to read Scripture more and more and understand it more deeply so that we can counteract some of those feelings of self-sufficiency. As we grow in our theological understanding, we should become more and more convinced that we have nothing to offer to God to move him to give us a place in his Kingdom. The complexities of theology support the basic truths and give credence to the fact that we are like little children when it comes to providing for ourselves.

The Bible does not support a childlike faith, if by that we mean a faith that is not examined and deepened. We need more than that as we become adults. Rather, instead of depending on storybook understanding of God's Word, we can be assured that as we study the Bible, we will become more and more aware of how complex and vast is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. And the more we know, the more we will realize how like little children we need to be, trusting fully on God's grace and never on our own merit.

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