

As Little Children

"I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes, for so it seemed good in Thy sight"-Matt. 11:25.

There are many touching and beautiful references to children in the Scriptures. Among them none is more important or of deeper significance than the one contained in the 18th chapter of Matthew's gospel.

Christ's life mission was to provide a way of life and to teach men to walk in it. In this chapter we find the Great Teacher propounding a fundamental lesson with a graphic, unforgettable illustration. He came to teach Truth to a world which had, in the unbounded confidence of its ignorance, developed for itself an intricate and highly plausible system of philosophic self-deception.

This system, even in Christ's day, was already venerable with age. In fact we find it in full bloom 10 centuries earlier at the time that David lived and wrote, as his 49th Psalm clearly shows. Its keynote is found in v. 18 of that Psalm,

"Men will praise thee when thou doest well to thyself."

This has been man's watchword from the childhood of the race. If a man spends his time benefiting himself, building up wealth and power and prestige, he will be honored and flattered and fawned upon. The same banner of glorious selfishness still waves in unchallenged supremacy today.

So ingrained by centuries of repetition and habit is this principle of predominant self-consideration that it is often unquestioningly taken for granted as a basis of interpreting Christ's teaching, even among the brotherhood.

As this chapter opens, we find Christ's own chosen disciples eagerly crowding around him as each confidently pressed his claim to the honor of pre-eminence-over which they had previously disputed among themselves.

"At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?"-verse 1.

Can we imagine the feelings of Jesus? How utterly alone he must have felt! How overpowering the consciousness that he alone of the earth's millions could see through its head-long folly! How crushing the weight of his single-handed task of instruction and enlightenment!

"And Jesus called a little child unto him, and

set him in the midst of them"-verse 2.

On another occasion the disciples had imperiously forbidden children to bother Christ. The setting up of the kingdom was a work for men, they said. The glorious, majestic Messiah of Israel had no time for children.

He had been very angry on that occasion as he rebuked their proud and misguided zeal. Here again a great and fundamental lesson is to be driven home.

"Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" they had asked. How they underestimated the privilege of their position and the difficulties of the long, hard road that lay before them! Christ's answer fell with sobering weight on their enthusiastic rivalries. They were going far too fast. Entrance into the Kingdom was no foregone conclusion as they had hastily assumed. Directing their attention to the despised child in their midst, he said (v. 3)

"Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall NOT ENTER into the Kingdom of heaven."

Here was a new and bewildering viewpoint. The children whom they had thrust away were set before them as examples of the attitude to which they must be converted if they would so much as even gain an entrance to the Kingdom, let alone be greatest in it.

In what way are we to become as children? Mainly in unlearning many of the lessons that the world has carefully taught us. In going back to childhood's viewpoint that we may learn anew in truth from Christ. How early the world teaches its children selfishness and ambition and bitterness and distrust! This is the sordid legacy that is carefully handed down. Even if it can give us nothing else, it takes infinite pains to teach us this.

This third verse is not merely a pleasing figure of speech. It is not to be contemplated abstractly with a warm glow of sentimental approbation. It is a positive command, an absolute ultimatum.

"Whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child" (as Luke's record gives it) "shall IN NO WISE enter therein."

The world regards itself and us as men-wonderful, mature, self-dependent creatures of vast intellect and even vaster importance. And it engages with an amusing, but tragic, obsession in a multitude of pursuits which it describes by various flesh-appealing phrases, such as "getting somewhere," "being somebody," "amounting to something" and similar terms. All of which represent, in the main, the accumulation of various amounts of property, prestige and power (often quite useless and always troublesome), each increasing in desirability as it becomes inaccessible and enviable to others less fortunate.

The basis of its operations it terms "self-preservation, the first law of nature," which, of course, in Scriptural terms, is the mind of the flesh. In all its activities the world worships maturity, adulthood, self-reliance, aggressiveness, ambition, and domination.

How necessary and refreshing is the lesson brought to our attention in this scene from the life of Christ! The world brusquely says, "Adults only." The gentle message of Christ is, "None but children."

Before we can receive his blessing we must cast aside these noble, manly, lofty delusions of self-dependence; we must realize the paltriness of the achievements upon which the world has built its illusions of grandeur; and we must unreservedly confess our utter and childish helplessness.

In analyzing the qualities of childhood we must use discernment. The Bible does not introduce children to our attention as models of perfection-much to the contrary-but the observing mind will see the lessons that Christ teaches.

There are certain fundamental characteristics of childhood to which our notice is drawn. Their existence is explained by the incomplete development and hardening of the motions of sin, and the limited opportunity that worldly maturity has had to poison the mind and impressions with its false wisdom and cut-throat philosophy. Therefore, the younger the child, usually the better the example.

The first childish quality that is drawn to our attention is humility. This is the basic lesson of the present chapter:

"Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven"-verse 4.

Childlike humility-not a hypocritical or ceremonial self-abasement, but a free and natural

recognition of inferiority, unmarred by any tendency either to glory in it or to conceal it. The natural reaction of the normal child before it learns from its elders the questionable worldly wisdom of pride, deception and dissimulation.

Why is humility necessary? Because it is the inevitable accompaniment of wisdom and a clear understanding of our position, and its absence indicates either ignorance or deceit -both equally fatal.

This overlaps another trait of childhood we must possess naturalness. Society has chosen to lade itself with a thick clay of sham and artificiality. Outward appearance is made

the all-important thing. The scriptural lesson is that outward show and inward worth are very rare companions.

To the world's dull senses, intrinsic solemnity and sincerity have no appeal. It must have the gaudy, mincing pageantry that, to the eye of wisdom, speaks of a sad emptiness within. Paul suffered much from shallow minded men who gloried in appearances and belittled his unreserved heartiness and lack of ostentation.

The unconscious wisdom of young childhood, which makes no false pretence of splendor, knowledge, or importance, is a refreshing antidote to the universal adult practice of attempting to disguise a weak, pitiful, decaying body of sin with gaudy embellishments of dress, deportment and conversation. a * +

Then there is simplicity,

"In simplicity and Godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God."

Simplicity-the word breathes of an indescribable peace and tranquility from the countless unanswerable complexities of existence. The patriarch Job suffered anguish of mind as he sought to plumb the fathomless depths of God's ways and appointments, but he was taught to find peace in the assurance that in the ultimate all things work together for good, and God is just, and all man needs is simple faith.

Solomon too, in Ecclesiastes, ponders and weighs the inconsistencies of life and experience and he, like job, learns he must accept it with childlike simplicity: "Fear God and keep His commandments-this is the whole duty of man."

Man's sole concern and obligation is to learn God's will as thoroughly as his opportunities permit and, of course, to obey it. Nothing else need bother us. Childlike simplicity and singleness of purpose is the keynote. It is grown men, with idle, speculating minds, that have added all the complications.

The next example we can glean from the chapter we are considering. Peter (always the first to speak), desirous of applying Christ's lesson and anxious to catch its spirit, asks: "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?"

Poor Peter! Who but an adult would think of counting forgivenesses? How noble he felt! Seven times! The Rabbis, we are told, limited it to three.

But again we must turn to the nobility of infancy for an example of Christ's answer. There is to be no reckoning of forgivenesses. How repeatedly a small child will forgive and forget! How soon are hurts forgotten! How easy reconciliation! What young child would think of the cramped and calculating course of grudgingly numbering these occasions?

It takes a mature adult to properly bear a grudge.

Consider the solemnity of Christ's final words on the subject. Speaking of the miserable fate of the unmerciful debtor in his parable, he says, v. 35,

"So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye FROM YOUR HEART forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses."

Then there is teachableness. A willingness and ability to learn, a desire for knowledge, a free unashamed recognition of ignorance, frank and open honesty of mind. There is a sad line of demarcation between childhood and maturity, when the fund of knowledge becomes regarded as sufficient, and all inlets are closed. At this point progress and growth stop. Opinions harden. The faculty of fresh, unbiased reasoning withers like an unused limb. Desire to learn ceases. There is no longer any sensation of incompleteness of knowledge. The possibility of error becomes unthinkable. Childhood is over. Maturity has been reached.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, refers to another feature of childhood's superiority. "In malice, be ye children," he exhorts them.

What is malice? Enmity of heart, ill-will, spite, a deep-seated bitterness that delights in the misery of perversity, a rottenness of the bones, any state of mind that magnifies unpleasant and meaningless trifles and sows malignant seeds of discord. An ugly thing, is it not?

And do we think we are free from it? Then why do we laugh at another's misfortune or embarrassment? Why do we see humor in things that create discomfort? Latent malice is in every heart-"In my flesh dwelleth no good thing."

Peter, using the same example of childhood, appeals to extreme infancy for his illustration,

"Laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes."

Here Peter mentions another attribute of infancy-guilelessness, simple innocence. A broad and intimate acquaintance with facts is not always desirable. If God has condemned a thing, it is much more pleasing to Him if we can accept His judgment as loving children and leave it alone without first having to know all about it.

"Let them go their way, let them see the other side-the experience is good," the foolish world says, "Let them weather the storm-it will teach them self-reliance." But such philosophy is heedless of the tremendous percentage the storm sweeps relentlessly away, and it ignores God's lesson that self-reliance is at best a broken reed.

God teaches that there is neither wisdom nor kindness in exposing tender shoots to a blast that tests the endurance of ill-rooted faith. Christ's prayer was that God should keep His children from the evil that is in the world and man is not wiser than God. When Jesus was urged to unnecessarily expose himself, he replied

"Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."

The parent-child figure is nowhere more strongly emphasized than in relation to God's fundamental requirement -obedience in simple faith.

"Be ye as obedient children."

No amount of laborious and complicated service and worship and devotion is to be compared with simple obedience. Some men do many wonderful works in Christ's name but do

they pass the acid test of a humble childlike desire to know and obey God's elementary requirements, regardless of their apparent contradiction of the world's wisdom? Are their mighty works done their way, or God's?

"If not," declares Christ, "If they do not the will of my Father, no amount of parading their great works will get them into my kingdom." Why not? Why shouldn't a lifetime of noble, self-sacrificing, well-meaning service be rewarded? Because they miss the fundamental issue of the Gospel. It is not of works but of childlike, unquestioning faith.

To enter the Kingdom, a man must be absolutely righteous. The Bride is to be presented "holy and without blemish, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing." Even 99% is not sufficient. But no man can accomplish this for himself. No amount of effort and service can do it. If it were possible, then man could glory.

There is only one way to become wholly righteous. God has promised to cover sin and impute perfect righteousness on the basis of tried faith. If a man's life and conduct are guided by implicit faith, God will count him righteous.

Here again is illustrated Christ's declaration that we can only enter the Kingdom as children. We must have righteousness to enter, but it is not the manly, self-confident, self-reliant, earned righteousness of works. It is the faithful, trustful, childlike imputed righteousness of grace.

We are brought to the last and most important childlike characteristic we must evidence. The one upon which the parent-child relation of God and man is primarily based trustfulness—a child's trust and a Father's care.

Here is where the example of childhood faces its most difficult task—to teach adult faith to rely on the invisible, immovable Rock, and not the visible, shifting sand. To relax its frantic and worrying efforts to build security out of perishing mammon, and in the serene confidence of childlike faith to feel the assuring strength of the everlasting arms.

Our relationship to God is as children, shaping their characters under their father's care. As such there are things to which we must give heed, and things to which we must not. As a Father to His children, God has said to us,

"Take no thought for temporal things—I shall supply them as they are needed. What you must do in the few brief years at your disposal is to diligently prepare yourselves for the work I have in store for you. You have much to do and the time is short. Be content with what I give you and remember, too, that sometimes I shall give you more than you need to see if you use MY GOODS wisely and faithfully FOR ME, or if you squander them upon yourselves. Later on you must give an account of how you have used your time and opportunities and possessions."

A true conception of our position as children will lead us to a proper use of our time. Childhood is a limited period, a time of passing opportunity. It is a time for learning and preparing. In it the basis of the future is laid. It is a time of education and discipline—often of necessary and beneficial chastisement.

If used diligently and wisely and intelligently and obediently it will lead to an acceptable and eternal manhood. If used foolishly or thoughtlessly or frittered in pleasure or wasted in ambition, it will, of course, lead to another end just as eternal and inevitable.

If we rely on ourselves, our knowledge, our ability, we lose the strongest incentive to resist temptation when it affects our wellbeing but if we in faith cast aside worldly security and throw ourselves entirely upon God's care, knowing that we shall only be cared for if we are well pleasing to Him, it will be a strong deterrent to doing anything that may forfeit His care and guardianship.

That is, if our whole treasure and insurance and dependence is in heaven in the shape of God's favor and care, we shall be much more careful not to jeopardize it or let it lapse by rendering a faulty obedience.

Let us then-in humility, in naturalness, in simplicity, in forgiveness, in freedom from malice, in purity, in guilelessness, in trustfulness, in heedlessness of worldly cares, in dependence on our Father-be obedient children, worthy of our exalted relationship to Him.

Discernment, we have said, is necessary to profitably extract the lessons of childhood. This is a scriptural warning. There are qualities inherent in childhood which we must resolutely put away. Paul said (1 Cor. 13:11)

"When I became a man, I put away childish things."

It is these things, sadly enough, to which we tend to cling.

The smallnesses, the limited perception, the narrow outlook, the desire for amusements, the petty quarrels, the fussing over trifles, the frivolity, the foolishness, the love of pleasure, the playing of games, the silly talking, the daydreaming, the lack of ability to face and analyze facts, the fatal attraction of novelty and color, the immature love of bright toys and shiny playthings, the lack of self-control, and of courage to think and to be different-these things, upon becoming men, we must firmly put away.

"Brethren, be not children in understanding in understanding be men"-1 Corinth. 14:20.

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