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Jesus Loves

By GERALD A. KLINGBEIL

the (Little) Children

Discovering the difference between being and doing

Children play an important role in Scripture. When Adam and Eve were created in God’s image and likeness, their ability to have children was a small reflection of God’s creative power. Children were considered a divine blessing in the biblical world (Ps. 127: 3, 4; 128:3, 4). They even participated in worship and ritual (Ex. 13:8, 14). Every birth reminded parents that God had not forgotten them, that He would be faithful to His covenant blessings (Gen. 12:1-3). Abraham and Sarah without Isaac just doesn’t make sense.

The most famous baby in all of Scripture, however, must be Baby Jesus. His arrival marked the fulfillment of prophetic time and offered the most profound glimpse into God’s plan of salvation. “The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14, ESV),¹ the prophet Isaiah had written nearly 700 years earlier. Matthew recognizes the baby as the fulfillment of this prophecy (Matt. 1:23). Jesus, the Savior of the world, comes as a baby and grows like so many children before Him and after Him. Those who paid attention recognized Him as the fulfillment of Genesis 3:15 and all the other messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.

In the Trenches

We know very little about Jesus’ childhood, but upon turning 30 years of age, He steps into history’s limelight

(Luke 3:23). He heals, He touches, He embraces, He listens—and yes, He also preaches and teaches.

Jesus offers a unique view on how God sees children as He makes time for the children surrounding Him. His disciples do not always seem to get that. How can the Master take precious time to embrace and bless some children brought to Him by their parents? Plans needed to be made; sermons needed to be preached; leaders needed to be convinced and won over.

Yet Jesus loves the children. “To us these scenes are moving,” writes biblical scholar Roy Zuck. “But to Jesus’ close followers, his actions were disturbing, his words were stunning.”²

Jesus seems to turn conventional wisdom on its head. Children needed to learn from the adults surrounding them. Parents were tasked to guide the young toward God’s kingdom. They could understand the plan. They could make sense of the senseless. They could explain—or could they?

Here is Jesus’ take on conventional truth:

You want to enter God’s kingdom? OK, become like little children (Matt. 18:3).

You want to be great in God’s eyes? Fine, humble yourself like a little child (verse 4).

You want to welcome Me? No problem: welcome one of these little children (Mark 9:37).

“The prodigal is not ready for the father’s love.”

You want to be on God’s good side? Well, don’t cause any of these little ones who believe in me to sin (verse 42).

Why Children?

Why did Jesus repeatedly point to children as He introduced the extension and principles of His kingdom? Jesus surely knew that humanity—all humanity, including also children—needed redemption and divine grace. We all are sinners falling short of righteousness—no matter how old we are.

Jesus’ embrace of children as object lessons as He shared the good news highlights a key characteristic of a child that is true in every culture. Children know that they need help. When they hurt, they run crying to Mommy or Daddy. When they are hungry, they cry and let us know that there is a problem. Unlike a newly-born foal or calf that starts walking within hours and knows how to suckle from its mother, human babies will die if no one takes care of them. Could it be that Jesus wants to teach us to recognize our helplessness and dependence—particularly in a culture of self-improvement extolling the “we can do it” winner mentality? Do we recognize our need—and then run into the arms of our heavenly Father?

What about hierarchy and curried favors? “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matt. 18:1) reminds us that true greatness involves humility and meekness—two characteristics that are in short supply in today’s selfie-minded social media world. Mark tells us in his retelling of the story that the disciples had argued about who was the greatest as they walked into Capernaum (Mark 9:33-35). Greatness in God’s kingdom means forgetting oneself in service to others. Ultimately, as noted by Zuck, it means that “since greatness is found in the least, then all are great, and there is no place for wrangling over rank.”³ A sobering thought in the midst of a world obsessed by hierarchy and status.

Is Jesus still speaking to His church today?

The Parent-God

Jesus included many stories about fathers and sons. His most famous one is recounted in Luke 15. We know it as the parable of the prodigal son. A younger son demands his share of the father’s fortune and manages to run through the cash in record time. At rock bottom and hungry, he remembers his father and decides to come home. He recognizes his guilt; he knows that he has messed up; he has prepared his stump speech and is ready.

But he is not ready for the father’s love. Here is somebody who kept a close watch on the road leading up to the home, hoping for the improbable. Every day the father waited for his son to come home.

When he sees the forlorn and ragged person making his way slowly toward the house, he knows who this must be. He doesn’t have to think twice. He picks up his garments—and runs as fast as he can. His son has come home. Forgiveness is extended, a new beginning, grace we can see.

When Jesus tells the story, He has a number of audiences. There were Pharisees and teachers of the law who didn’t like the fact that tax collectors and sinners were drawing close to the Master (Luke 15:1, 2). They, like the older brother, thought that grace was limited and conditional. The Father (with a capital F), however, extends grace unconditionally. After all, this is His son or daughter who had been lost but now is found.

Enough Grace

Children can accept unmerited favor. Their trust is literal—not theological or abstract. Instinctively they are drawn to Jesus. When we sang “Jesus loves the little children” with my three girls when they were younger, they always sang loud and noisily and with gusto—there was no hesitation. They knew this to be true, because Jesus had said so.

During Jesus’ earthly ministry His love for the children around Him and His interaction with them functioned as a paradigm of God’s kingdom. Humility, service, acceptance, trust, and dependence on unmerited grace are all key values in this kingdom. In a world that values self-determination and assertiveness, becoming like a child can be a tough act. But that’s exactly what Jesus told us to do—and that’s no child’s play. ■

¹ Scripture quotations marked ESV are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Roy B. Zuck, *Precious in His Sight: Childhood and Children in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 201.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 209.



Gerald A. Klingbeil is an associate editor of *Adventist World*. He has learned many valuable lessons from watching his three daughters loving Jesus just as He is.